

**Broken American Heart: A History of Liberalism, Marxism, and  
the Rise of the Weathermen in Students for a Democratic Society**

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*For Grandma*

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## *Rage-*

On the night of October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1969, the anti-imperialist, anti-racist radicals known as the Weathermen amassed in Lincoln Park in Chicago, the sight of the brutal beat down which many of them had received at the hands of the Chicago Police Department nearly a year ago during the Democratic National Convention. This night, like the events of the previous year, would end in police confrontation, arrests, and bloodshed. But on this night, the Weathermen were counting on it.

Gone were the signs with peaceful political slogans, songs of unity, and the optimism of an earlier Students for a Democratic Society, the mass student organization from which the Weathermen emerged in the late 1960's. At this event, North Vietnamese flags and weapons set the tone and sent the message for the legion of young American men and women present and ready to do battle with the state.<sup>1</sup> On this night, the violence towards police and property were not merely to protest the war in Vietnam, but to *bring the war home*. This was not an action to get the attention of the politicians in the city, for they were useless. Revolution was the goal, and not in a classical Marxist sense, for the driving factor in that analysis, the working class at large, had proven useless as well. Nay, this was a step towards the revolution driven by the domestic wing of national liberation movements abroad, the torch bearers of militant movement to defeat white supremacy; the white, revolutionary youth.

The Days of Rage action described above and the ideology behind it stand in near apocalyptic contrast to the spirit of 1962, when the founding document of SDS, the *Port Huron Statement*, was penned. This document, with its focus on inclusive organizing based on non-ideologically dogmatic participatory democracy within a context of social progress

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), 109-111.

and protest, gave rise to the ultimate student organizing movement of the 1960's. But now, this formerly leftist inclusive organization committed to liberal forms of change had been transformed into an exclusive, explicitly revolutionary organization hell bent on upending the socio-economic and political system that had produced assassinations, oppression, and unthinkable injustice that so characterized the era in which these radicals came of age.

How did a student organization, founded as a progressive, inclusive group with a faith in change through the democratic liberal system, evolve into an exclusive vanguardist white fighting force bent on revolutionary armed struggle? To fully understand this issue, it is crucial to look at the driving force that is ideology, especially in a political organization such as SDS. Students for a Democratic Society, like any individual or group of individuals, would ask similar questions of itself when deciding on an ideological path. What are the issues, and by extensions reforms, that we care about, how can they be realized, and who will drive these reforms to the point of manifestation, all in the context of our values? Consequently, the answers to these crucial questions for a political organization would signal their lifeblood of a political program and analysis of society.

As SDS looked upon the world, in 1962 just as much as 1969, these questions defined the ideological direction with which the organization approached its program and analysis of the American socio-economic and geo-political landscape. During these years, from the "hopeful" period of the drafting of *The Port Huron Statement* to the Days of Rage, SDS would transition its ideological orientation based on the feasibility of a given ideology's ability to fulfill their goals in the context of their values.

In its early period, roughly 1960 to 1965, SDS' ideological orientation rested on establishment liberalism--establishment in the sense of the existing power structure in the

United States; a Constitutional-based federal republic<sup>2</sup> with a capitalist economic structure; and liberal in its belief in the ability to affect change through the political process with an emphasis placed on building a social welfare state, federally protected civil rights and civil liberties, and coalition electoral politics. A belief in the institutional change that liberalism offered, indeed the promise of liberalism, was shattered, and SDS looked to the American Marxist tradition, during the period 1965-1969. Marxist, in the sense of seeking to overturn the established politico-economic system and replace it with a socialized ownership of the means of production, with the industrial working class as the major agent of bringing about that revolution. But American, in the sense that the ideology was entrenched in the realities another era, marred in dogmatic battles, and irreconcilable to a labor movement de-radicalized by McCarthyism.

By 1969, American Marxism had proved itself unable to meet the demands SDS had placed on it. A small cadre of SDS radicals, drawing their inspiration from the Third World liberation movements, sought to formulate a political ideology that was both revolutionary, in the sense of overthrowing the establishment that had proven itself inherently reactionary to change, but absent of the antiquated and arresting tenants of Marxism: an ideology bold enough to fill in for the failure of liberalism to live up to its ideological promise and the failure of the Marxist tradition in the United States to present a viable alternative.

This cadre would come to be known as the Weathermen, and their political ideology would be defined by working towards a socialist revolution to overcome white supremacy and imperialism, with the agents of change the only people who it seemed were up to the

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<sup>2</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "North America: United States", *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html> (accessed March 23, 2011)

challenge: themselves, in coalition with Third World liberation movements abroad and within racialized minority communities in the U.S.

The inability of liberalism and Marxism to meet the demands of SDS radicals was to a certain extent inherent in the program of the ideologies themselves, but also reflective of the actors who operated within them. By 1965, establishment liberalism was analyzed by SDS not as the solution to oppression, but, an oppressor in itself, driven by its capitalist system to exploit through racial and imperialist violence.

Early SDS, however, looked to this system of liberalism from an intelligent and informed position during the early 1960's, and made the conscious decision to support it and its guiding tenants of the New Deal social welfare and racial equality through the institutional avenues of the establishment. In large part, this initial faith in the promise of liberalism was a faith in the promise of President Kennedy. While one man in a colossal federal government, Kennedy's progressive stances on Civil Rights, poverty, and Cold War militarism, as well as his willingness to capitalize on the aspirations of the youth in America of which SDS was a part of, truly presented few reasons not to put a faith in the promise of the liberal establishment. With his death, the promise of liberalism disappeared into the greatest fears of liberalism. Speaking on the move from a program of domestic reform to radicalism and revolution in the organization, founding SDS member Tom Hayden stated:

"I think we would have seen a profound change in the whole country, if other things didn't overtake us. The assassination of Kennedy, the ascension of Johnson, the decision to escalate the Vietnam War. That brought an end to the period of domestic reform- 1960-1964- and when the outer conditions change, you know, any strategy that depends on that begins to go haywire. And our strategy- the civil rights movement in the South, economic movements in the North- depended entirely on the country facing its contradictions at home...But when Kennedy was killed and Johnson came in and the war escalated, you had a complete reversal.



So the underlying rug was, I think, pulled out from a series of projects that might have had a tremendous effect”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the SDS program was based on liberalism’s ability to face “its contradictions at home,” which JFK appeared willing and capable of doing. Under Johnson, these contradictions were allowed to fester to the point of chaos: an unjust war perpetuated amorally for capitalism and ideology as well as the inability of social programs to make up for racial and class inequities demonstrated the weakness of electoral politics and legislation to fundamentally and materialistically affect injustice. The promise of liberalism, the promise of Kennedy’s reforms, indicated a system that could produce the change SDS was demanding. But in its worst manifestation after JFK’s death, it was the oppressor itself.

When the break away from liberalism came, having been analyzed as that oppressor, the appeal of a socialist future in the context of revolutionary overthrow of Marxism was great. Marxism, however, did not present a dynamic program that could reconcile the realities of the American system. SDS struggled in the treacherous territory of American Marxism, creating factionalism characteristic of the ideology, but with no answer to the increasingly dire ills being perpetuated by the government. That is not to say that there was not any leadership from a Marxist Left, but from the point of view of SDS, it was rooted in another era and insufficiently bold enough to tackle the dire issues of the day. SDS was willing to be that dynamic, and was thrust into a leadership position on the Left because of it, but Marxism could not provide the program or guidance which SDS needed and the dire issues of the day demanded.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Hayden, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (September 29, 1978), 8-9.

The Weathermen, looking at the world in 1969, saw the two dominant political ideologies of the day, liberalism and Marxism, as failures. In their despair at the brutal oppression of Third World people in the U.S. and abroad, the Weathermen formulated an ideology which allowed them to work for an expedient end to this crushing injustice. The Weathermen were responding to dire circumstances without guidance, without a history to build upon, and without leadership in the wake of liberalism's betrayal, and Marxism's inability to vivaciously respond to it.

My analysis of the trajectory for ideological development in SDS is not unlike the standard historiography, going "from liberal to radical to revolutionary," in the words of SDSer Bob Ross.<sup>4</sup> Historian David Barber, however, sees the Weathermen operating within "a single broad ideological consensus"<sup>5</sup> with the various Marxist factions I identify in chapter two of my work (*Revolutionary Youth Movement II and the Progressive Labor Party*). I argue in this thesis, however, that the Weathermen's break with Marxism over the agency of the working class is so fundamental, that it represents a new strain of political ideology in itself even as it remains in dialogue with traditional Marxist ideology.

Analyzing the development of SDS with a focus on liberalism and Marxism, the two dominant political ideologies of the time, has not been the focus of scholarly literature on the history of SDS. Although these ideologies have not been ignored by any means, their deficiencies have not been widely analyzed as a driving factor in the development of SDS. For Barber, writing on the perceived "failures" of SDS from 1965-1970, the inability of the white New Left to transcend the centrality of white actors, and truly relate to the demands of

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Ross, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (July 1978), 10.

<sup>5</sup> David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 2008), 5.

the Civil Rights and later Black Power struggle was the organization's downfall. Analyzing SDS in the post-domestic reform period of the organization's history, Barber sees SDS' turn to revolutionary and Marxist ideologies as "reasserting the centrality of white radicals."<sup>6</sup>

Historian James Miller, who has explored the history of SDS during the same period, describes the liberal reformism of the *Port Huron* generation as the authentic SDS, and the move towards Marxism as fueled by uninformed militancy in the wake of the Vietnam War and Black Power, bitingy assigning the Weathermen to a trail of "tear gas, drugs, and pseudo Marxist cant."<sup>7</sup> Given my focus on the legacy of Kennedy in the context of the promise of liberalism, it is important to note that Miller relegates the impact of Kennedy's assassination to one sentence, reflecting his view that JFK had an minimal influence on SDS and its engagement with the liberal tradition.

This thesis argues that SDS radicals throughout the organization's existence saw the ills and injustices around them, looked authentically at the ideologies of liberalism and Marxism as possible avenues of change, and having exhausted their possibilities, found them irreconcilable to the realities of the time. In this sense, my analysis is similar to that of historian Dan Berger, who also sees the turn toward revolutionary politics and the ideology of the Weathermen as an authentic reaction to the developments of geo-politics, although he focuses much more on elements of state repression in inspiring the Weathermen's ideology, and his work only focuses on the Weathermen.

In this work, I place the Weathermen as the final stage of the history of SDS for a number of reasons. First, as holders of the keys to the National Office of SDS in Chicago and the organization's last elected officers, they were the final leaders of Students for a Democratic

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<sup>6</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 188.

<sup>7</sup> James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege in Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 16.

Society. Second, as “authentic descendent[s] of the Port Huron generation”<sup>8</sup> in the words of Tom Hayden, the Weathermen embody more than any other faction in the latter years of SDS the metamorphosis that the organization went through since its founding in 1960. Third, the Weathermen have sparked the imagination of both historians and popular culture. The organization is widely blamed for the demise of SDS, as they were the ones who disbanded the organization in 1969. The release of memoirs from several former Weathermen, including Bill Ayers and Mark Rudd, have brought the Weathermen back into public discourse. Their violent tactics, especially scrutinized in the wake of the 2008 U.S Presidential campaign when Barack Obama was tied to former Weatherman Bill Ayers, has also joined the national debate on terrorism. And fourth, ending with the Weathermen before they went underground is appropriate place in SDS historiography, with such SDS scholars as James Miller and Kirkpatrick Sale<sup>9</sup> taking up roughly the same time period as comprising the history of SDS.

The chapters of this thesis are arranged thematically by dominant ideological leanings in SDS, but that thematic structure also lends itself to a rough chronology. Chapter one gives background on SDS’ history with the Old Left, and its foundation in liberalism, roughly 1960-1964. It pays special attention to the early position papers of the organization, especially *The Port Huron Statement*. This chapter also deals with the assassination of President Kennedy and its affect on demise of SDS’ faith in liberalism, along with the rejection of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party by at Democratic National Convention in 1964 and heightening of the Vietnam War. This chapter ends with the first and second national anti-war demonstrations in Washington D.C, with special attention given to

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Hayden, “The Way We Were,” introduction to *The Port Huron Statement, The Visionary Call of the 1960’s Revolution*, ed. Tom Hayden (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973).

Paul Potter and Carl Oglesby's scathing analyses of the liberal system in their relative speeches at the demonstrations.

Chapter two narrates SDS' history with Marxism, roughly 1965-1969. The chapter begins with a discussion of the dialogue SDS had with the Marxist tradition during its early period, and then transitions into the influence that Black Power and Third World Liberation movements had in driving SDS' Marxist turn. The heightening international and domestic crises of the second half of the 1960's such as the Vietnam War and urban unrest are juxtaposed with the search of SDS to find an appropriate Marxist program, highlighting questions of labor agency, the role of national liberation, and students in the context of a "new working class."

Chapter three deals primarily with the Weathermen and their program, tactics, and ideology up to 1969, especially as a response to the failures of a classical Marxist ideology. It takes up the debate over the intellectual soundness of the group, as well as their controversial emphasis on militant direct action. This chapter ends with an analysis of the perceived failure of liberalism and Marxism for the Weathermen, taking into account the promise of liberalism embodied under President Kennedy and lack of a viable Marxist Left.

## Chapter One: The Promise of Liberalism

*“The United States, as the world knows, will never start a war. We do not want a war. We do not now expect a war. This generation of Americans has already had enough--more than enough--of war and hate and oppression.”*<sup>10</sup>

-John F. Kennedy, American University, 1963

In his closing remarks during the commencement speech at American University in 1963, President John F. Kennedy noted a growing discontent amongst the student population in the United States: Towards war, both cold, in the case of the arms race with the Soviet Union, and hot, in the case of proxy wars and actions such as in Korea and Cuba – towards hate, manifested in the segregationist, white supremacist dominated south – and towards oppression, which, in its economic and political forms, transcended race, nationality, and class.

Students for a Democratic Society was a national student political organization primarily made up of the youth from the generation Kennedy was addressing, coalescing around a common passionate desire to confront the war, hate, and oppression which they saw domestically and abroad. SDS, forming in 1960 with a handful of chapters spread across the country, sought to frame a political program and analysis in the context of the great challenges facing the United States. Racial injustice loomed across the country, and the Civil Rights movement responded with an electrifying turn towards non-violent civil disobedience to combat oppression, catalyzed by the lunch counter sit-ins of black college students in segregationist Greensborough, North Carolina.<sup>11</sup> The issue of poverty in urban northern cities and rural southern areas such as Appalachia was increasingly becoming part of the national

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<sup>10</sup> John F. Kennedy, “American University Commencement Address,” June 10, 1963, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkamericanuniversityaddress.html> (accessed January 15, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

dialogue. This was in no small part due to the work of political radical and SDS advisor Michael Harrington and his groundbreaking book on the subject, *The Other America*.<sup>12</sup> The 1950's had been the decade which solidified the myth of the American Century, under which the United States had the right and the duty to involve itself in international affairs in the name of democracy.<sup>13</sup> As the post-WWII Cold War status quo solidified, however, a growing discomfort arose as to how successfully the U.S was fulfilling their charge as the beacon of freedom for the world. This same Cold War status quo caused a fierce anti-Communist backlash in the United States, hindering candid political dialogue and affecting many political organizations, including SDS.

A survey of the American political-economic system during the formation of SDS' political ideology reveals a crucial aspect of that system: that liberalism was a relevant and crucial aspect of any Left movement that was to succeed.<sup>14</sup> Liberals, embodied by the youthful Kennedy, seemed to have identified the ills plaguing the U.S and taken the initial first steps towards their resolution. SDS, looking towards the political Left for a platform to mount their efforts in social reform, saw liberalism as entrenched in the institutions of the U.S, but established liberals open to bringing about positive change if the demand was placed upon them. The liberal political principles such as coalition building, New Deal welfare policies, and the strong relationship between liberals in the political arena and organized

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Hayden notes the influence of Harrington's book on President Kennedy, and by extension, poverty coming into the national dialogue. Tom Hayden, "The Way We Were," introduction to *The Port Huron Statement, The Visionary Call of the 1960's Revolution*, ed. Tom Hayden (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Term first coined by Henry Luce in his article titled "The American Century." Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Life Magazine*, February 17, 1941.

<sup>14</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), in *The Port Huron Statement, The Visionary Call of the 1960's Revolution*, ed. Tom Hayden (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005), 167; *The Port Huron Statement*, Courtesy Office of Sen. Tom Hayden <http://www.h-net.org/~hst306/documents/huron.html> (accessed January 20, 2011).

labor were all quite appealing to the emerging New Left, as was their already established positions of power within the system. So too, was the language of liberal American democracy.

The promise of liberalism was a promise of a strong social welfare state, racial equality and a focus on domestic issues as opposed to Cold War militarism, which also characterized the demands of early 1960's SDS. Indeed, founding SDSer Tom Hayden would note that the goal SDS' early program was to "unify nearly everyone around the fulfillment of the New Deal dream;"<sup>15</sup> the iconic (and to a certain extent, idealistic) policy of 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S liberalism. Kennedy seemed on the path to realizing this "New Deal dream," and SDS would support the liberalism he embodied so long as it lived up to its lofty ideals.

## **POST WAR BACKGROUND**

Students for a Democratic Society, originally named Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), started as the campus offshoot for the group The League for Industrial Democracy (LID), a union-supported democratic socialist organization. Founded in 1905, LID was able to survive the anti-Communism of the 1950's by focusing their rhetoric on democratic participation and American traditions instead of the rhetoric of socialism, the latter of which no doubt triggered thoughts of Communism and the Russian menace amongst the majority of Americans.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, by the 1960's "socialism and communism were two words for the same evil" in mainstream political dialogue, and any kind of political platform that was easily traceable to either was going to have a difficult time gaining a large base of support in any non-radicalized sector of America.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> James Miller, "*Democracy in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 26-28.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, *Democracy*, 27.



It was that Communism, in fact, that the social democrats in LID feared could destroy any progressive organization, especially SDS. Having established themselves as fierce anti-Communist social democrats throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, LID saw the post-war liberal-labor relationship as hinging in a large part on the exclusion of Communists in the context of an avowedly pro-U.S. labor movement.<sup>18</sup> Early SDS, however, sought ideological inclusiveness over the now antiquated and meager threat of Communist “infiltration.” Not only was there little threat from Communists coming towards a campus organization, but the exclusion of students with even a minor Communist past potentially alienated young political thinkers who were looking for alternatives to the Soviet program.<sup>19</sup> In a May, 1961 SDS memorandum, founding SDSer Al Haber wrote of the Old Left battles over Communism:

“The times are such that the old ideologies no longer provide direction, much less solution. We must focus on the issue itself, analyse (*sic*) it, judge it, and act on it. At some point perhaps we will begin to see some ideological pattern, but for the moment vague abstractions can only confuse what must be a completely new working out of social experience.”<sup>20</sup>

This desire to escape from ideological battles and focus on issues would characterize SDS’ approach to political theorizing, and the inclusiveness which the organization promoted in the name of democratic participation and ideological candidness.

As a result, SDS would take an “anti-anti-Communist” approach to the issue of Communism,<sup>21</sup> leading to confrontation with the anti-Communist warriors in LID. In their

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<sup>18</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 120.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Flacks, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (September 25, 1978), 9. (Hereafter, *CHP*)

<sup>20</sup> Al Haber, “Memorandum on Students for a Democratic Society,” 20 May 1961, 6; Subject Vertical File: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (1); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>21</sup> R. Flacks, *CHP*, 9.

original position as the parent organization, however, LID would still have a say in guiding the position of SDS on Communism and other issues during the early 1960's.<sup>22</sup>

SDS' stance on Communism, however, was not a vindication of it. The Soviets had pursued undemocratic and aggressive tactics towards countering injustice, and SDS was turned off by the USSR's monolithic presence. In comparison, American open democratic participation in the context of liberalism, which the social democrats in LID focused their rhetoric upon, did provide a more authentic and moral avenue for human emancipation. While not completely against aspects of the Communist tradition that were in line with SDS' emphasis on democratic self-determination and dialogue, if the material manifestation of large scale socialism was Sovietism, than SDS did not want to be part of it.<sup>23</sup>

While liberalism, especially when juxtaposed with Sovietism, did have potential for democratic social change, that potential had not been realized during the first years of the 1960's. The non-violent resistance to segregation at Greensborough had spawned a new generation of Civil Rights activists such as those in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),<sup>24</sup> who were committed to direct actions, such as the Freedom Rides of 1961 which sought to end interstate bus segregation.<sup>25</sup> This inspiring turn towards militancy had had little effect on the liberal establishment, who, while quick to denounce southern

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<sup>22</sup> Gitlin describes the influence of LID representative Michael Harrington at the seminal Port Huron conference, and the fear of some SDS participants that his criticisms had not been met. See Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 113-116.

<sup>23</sup> Haber proposes "that our line in opposition to communism and totalitarianism be unequivocal, but expressed primarily in terms of positive commitment to democratic values." See Haber, "Memorandum," 7.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 9. Richard Flacks also notes in his *CHP* interview that the sit-ins proved to intellectuals in Ann Arbor that you could work towards social justice and be part of it, not just commenting on it. R. Flacks, *CHP*. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, *Struggle*, 33; Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Revolutionary Solidarity*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), 319-320.

racism, demonstrated little enforcement of Civil Rights court decisions, and were extremely hesitant to address the racism and segregation in the North.<sup>26</sup>

Internationally, the Cold War was also taking its toll on the moral and financial well being of the U.S. The economic burden of the arms race, as well as the fear and borderline absurdity of a peace-through-mutually-assured-destruction policy toward the Soviet Union created serious angst amongst the American public. The United States' growing military presence in Asia, as well as its approach to the broader decolonizing world, was coming into question as the U.S seemed to be siding with dictators and authoritarian leaders as opposed to popularly supported ones, trading democracy for a strong anti-Communist stance. Consequently, the near fanatical anti-Communist rhetoric greatly hindered open dialogue on the Cold War and its socio-political and economic implications.<sup>27</sup>

### **THE PORT HURON STATEMENT, 1962**

Racial injustice in the South, poverty in the cities of the North, and Cold War militarism all loomed large in June of 1962, when SDS released its seminal document, *The Port Huron Statement*. For the manifesto of an actively political group, this founding document is notable for its lack of a stringent political ideology. Not explicitly liberal, socialist, or promoting any other form of established political thought, the authors of *Port Huron* purposely left the intellectual political direction of their movement open, especially when compared to the heightened tension surrounding questions of ideological alliance. Instead, *Port Huron*

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<sup>26</sup> Tom Hayden, "Civil Rights in the United States," (New York: Students for a Democratic Society [19--]), 1-2, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>27</sup> Carl Oglesby would present a concise summary of U.S interventions starting in 1953 in his "Let Us Shape the Future" speech in 1965. Carl Oglesby, "Let Us Shape the Future" (1965), (Ithaca: Glad Day Press: 1966), 3, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan; Carl Oglesby, "Let Us Shape the Future," *SDS Document Library* [http://www.antiauthoritarian.net/sds\\_wuo/sds\\_documents/oglesby\\_future.html](http://www.antiauthoritarian.net/sds_wuo/sds_documents/oglesby_future.html) (accessed January 20, 2011).

focused on the idea of “participatory democracy,” a “convenient phrase” which avoided ideological dogmatism and promoted the non-controversial belief that people should take an active role in the decisions that have an affect on them.<sup>28</sup>

While a focus on democratic participation is a belief which could be supported across the political spectrum, participatory democracy had radical implications given the history of the Old Left and its agency of change. While social democratic and Marxists groups saw the working class as the primary agent of change, the New Left idea of participatory democracy and much of the theory behind *Port Huron* rested on the belief that other sectors of society could enact change as well. While *Port Huron* in no way disavows the working class or discredits their agency, the doctrine of participatory democracy emphasizes other agents as well: Civil Rights activists, the poor, and students; the iconic actors of the New Left. Indeed, C. Wright Mills, the inspiring sociologist who would influence much of SDS thought, posed that while it would be impossible to forsaken the tradition Left agency of the working class, “who is it that is getting fed up?...Who is it that is thinking and acting in radical ways? All over the world — in the bloc, outside the bloc and in between — the answer is the same: it is the young intelligentsia.”<sup>29</sup> *Port Huron* and its guiding doctrine of participatory democracy was a reflection of the burgeoning post-war agency and activism of students, as well as other non-proletarian agents.

The political orientation of *Port Huron*, non-ideological but on the political left during a time of heightened political awareness and intellectual intrigue, left conflicting views as to

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Hayden, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (September 29, 1978), 5.

<sup>29</sup> C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left” (New York: Students for a Democratic Society), 8, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan; C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left” <http://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/letter-new-left.htm> (accessed January 20, 2011).

the political leanings of the document, and, conflicting interpretations on its ideological foundation.<sup>30</sup> But while *Port Huron* did not endorse any political ideology and SDS sought ideological inclusiveness, the document drew heavily on the political ideology of liberalism, giving a vote of confidence to the American system of electoral politics as well as the liberal establishment.

## **SUPPORT FOR THE AMERICAN SYSTEM**

Throughout *The Port Huron Statement*, SDS consistently espouses social change through the establishment; electoral progressive gains via benevolent liberal politicians. No more prevalent is this in *Port Huron* and early SDS thought than in the support which the organization gave to president John F. Kennedy. By the time of *Port Huron*, JFK had proven himself a reformer to the stark Cold War politics that came before him. In a time when SDS saw the arms race and the policy of deterrence, “peace through mutually assured destruction,” as a flawed system of foreign policy that undermined peaceful diplomacy with military interests considered above all others, Kennedy sought a de-escalation of the arms race and promoted a nuclear test ban treaty.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, Kennedy would also promote détente with the Soviet Union the next year.<sup>32</sup> This echoed SDS’ call in *Port Huron* for a more humanistic form of diplomacy towards the Soviet Union and an end the rampant anti-Communist rhetoric, which the group saw as impeding a dialogue about solutions to foreign and domestic issues.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For discussion differing SDS interpretation of *The Port Huron Statement* and participatory democracy, see Miller, *Democracy*, 141-148.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Ross is citing Richard Flacks’ opinion. Bob Ross, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (July 1978), 11.

<sup>33</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 103.

Even though he had ordered the Bay of Pigs invasion, the President was also praised by SDS for his acceptance that it was valid for a Third World nation to take a neutral position on the Cold War. In *Port Huron*, SDS even notes that JFK supported sharing world resources and aiding developing nations not for political alliance purposes but “because it is right,” backing off on the support of authoritarian dictators in Latin America and Southeast Asia.<sup>34</sup> Dismayed by U.S support for military dictatorships over democratic movements in places such as Vietnam, this message was a breath of fresh air to SDS after years of military responses to decolonizing movements that were “more effective in deterring the growth of democracy than communism.”<sup>35</sup>

Even more than promising a new, more humane and democratic form of foreign policy in the context of the Cold War, Kennedy appealed to the New Left because he espoused that the youth of America would be play an active role in it as well. Announcing the Peace Corps on the steps of the Michigan Union in Ann Arbor, Kennedy’s program for sending American youth across the world to promote peace and do good works sparked the imagination of the generation. In a time when students couldn’t vote and *in loco parentis* was a fact of life on college campuses, the Peace Corps “legitimized the idea that you could do something responsible,”<sup>36</sup> and articulated in the form of Cold War policy the kind of political activity that SDS sought to legitimize.

It is crucial in analyzing the liberalism of the time, and SDS’ support of it, to examine this transformative presidency. Kennedy, the youngest president in the history of the U.S, had the ability to talk to the SDS generation, and, even unknowingly, tap into their desires. After a decade of the Cold War, with its intensity, convolution, and malice, here was a

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<sup>34</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 99-100

<sup>35</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Hayden, *CHP*, 2.

President who promised an alternative to the fecklessness of the 1950's status quo. When he announced the Peace Corps in 1960, former SDS president Carl Oglesby notes that JFK might not have known what he had tapped into, but that it did not take away from the act and the incredible intuition it took to capitalize on the excitement surrounding the idea.<sup>37</sup>

Of the Peace Corps as their final manifestation, especially because of the work of Judy and Alan Ruskin from Ann Arbor, Oglesby states:

“You had gone through the damn fifties learning from every side that you were incompetent to act, and that the world was beyond you. Now, suddenly, right out of the omphalos of Ann Arbor, there were voices saying “No, wait a minute, we can do things. We can find meaningful ways of engaging the reality we feel around us.” And therefore, “we can change reality from a haunting, doom-ridden, dreadful, empty thing, into creative lives and creative social lives, too. *Politics can make a difference*. You don't have to play by the rules. You can just step outside the tent, and you've got a whole new game going” [my italics added]<sup>38</sup>

With a President, the head of state and leader of the political establishment creating programs and tapping into the political and social desires of New Left radicals, it is difficult to argue that progress is not possible within liberal avenues of change and drastic measures must be taken to overthrow the established system. Aside from capitalizing on his own ideas, Kennedy also showed his stances were amenable to the desires of reform movements. When Kennedy gave the commencement speech at American University in 1963 where he addressed détente with the Soviet Union, SDSer Richard Flacks noted that “a lot of [the] rhetoric was borrowed from the peace movement and from the sorts of things we were saying prior to that.”<sup>39</sup> Even if the president unknowingly shared similar views and rhetoric with the peace movement and SDS, he remained an ally so long as their goals and aspiration remained similar.

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<sup>37</sup> Carl Oglesby, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (July 1978), 16.

<sup>38</sup> Oglesby, *CHP*, 15-16.

<sup>39</sup> R. Flacks, *CHP*, 11.

Although progressive in terms of his foreign policy, Kennedy continued to stop short of giving the Civil Rights movement the kind of support and attention which SDS demanded. Although acknowledging that the President's administration had done more for the cause of Civil Rights of any post-war administration, SDS compared Kennedy's work in Civil Rights with Eisenhower's stating that it was like "comparing whispers to silence when positively stentorian tones are demanded."<sup>40</sup> *Port Huron* noted the lack luster support that Kennedy had given to proposed Civil Rights legislation, and the "coolness" with which the administration had taken to the non-violent movement in the southern states.<sup>41</sup>

Sweeping Civil Rights legislation, of course, could only be passed by the U.S Congress. But Kennedy's Democratic Party had a southern racist element, the Dixiecrats, who not only supported the system of Jim Crow and segregation in their southern states, but were also war-hawks who had decisive say on Congressional committees that controlled military spending. Dixiecrats represented a reactionary wing of the Democrats who sought to block reform concerning issues of Cold War militarism, poverty, and racism.<sup>42</sup>

In *Port Huron*, SDS' answer to an unresponsive Democratic Party was not radical, but reorganizational within the context of the establishment. For a meaningful party system to develop in the U.S, the "party overlap" of the Dixiecrat-conservative Republican alliance had to be broken, and the Dixiecrats had to be kicked out of the Democratic Caucus in Congress.<sup>43</sup> Through this policy of realignment, SDS hoped that a party system that "frustrates democracy by confusing the individual citizen"<sup>44</sup> could be transformed into one in

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<sup>40</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 113.

<sup>41</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 114.

<sup>42</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 14-15.

<sup>43</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 136.

<sup>44</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 67.



which the Democratic Party stood as the unified force of progressives in the tradition of its “New Deal liberal leanings.”<sup>45</sup>

The demand of political party realignment reflected SDS’ faith in the possibility of the liberal establishment’s power to enact the kind of change that Kennedy was putting forth, and build upon what he had already put in place. This plan, given the Cold War segregationist status quo which the Dixiecrats supported, was an expedient way for liberals in the government to champion the progressive initiatives which SDS had believed they were capable of enacting. Realignment and the expulsion of the Dixiecrats from the Democratic Caucus would not only lend to Kennedy’s progressive policies a unified political party to support them, but also create the legislative wing of a truly liberal movement within the political establishment that SDS believed could promote progressive causes.<sup>46</sup>

A unified and liberal Democratic Party would lead Congress to play a crucial role in alleviating one of the greatest domestic ills in U.S society; poverty. On this issue, SDS sought the establishment of the welfare state and the right to organize in the work place for greater influence in treatment and corporate procedure. Chastising Congress for the current influences of corporations in the American political system, *Port Huron* saw the need to increase democratic oversight in the private sector, while the legislature at the time seemed to be ratifying the wishes of corporations.<sup>47</sup> In a world where participatory democracy did exist, explained *Port Huron*, the individual would have a say in the decisive decisions of the company because of its vital importance to one’s life and happiness. Corporations would also be held publically responsible to strong democratic regulation.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 14-15.

<sup>47</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 74.

<sup>48</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 54.

Congress was doing a paltry job of increasing economic democracy and oversight, noted by the “paradoxes and myths” of the American economy that foster a military-industrial complex and oppressive poverty amongst abundance.<sup>49</sup> SDS did, however, recognize the great gains of “New Deal reforms,” such as improvements to workplace conditions and restraints on employers. *Port Huron* promoted the welfare state within “existing institutions,” and saw the role of the state as crucial in amending the economic inequalities that plagued the U.S. Indeed SDS praised the expansion of such programs as social security and minimum wage requirements as moving in the right direction. In supporting the answer to poverty in form of government regulation with a basis in the progressive ideology of the New Deal, SDS was grounding its anti-poverty program in the context of institutional change and adopting the liberal line of economic reform within the free market system.<sup>50</sup>

### **LIBERAL ALLIANCES**

Liberalism as a political ideology is not only characterized by the avenues of socio-economic and political change which it advocates, but also by the agency of change which it promotes. SDS of the *Port Huron* generation promoted coalition electoral politics in the setting of the established U.S democracy. As an indicator of this leaning towards coalition politics, SDS aligned itself with the two major liberal forces in America outside of politicians and political parties: The Civil Rights movement and the Labor movement.

Civil Rights presented one of the vanguard social movements for change, as well as the most crucial one to increasing democracy in the United States. The Civil Rights movement, explicated *Port Huron*, was correct in pursuing voting rights in the South because “ the new emphasis on the vote heralds the use of political means to solve the problems of equality in

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<sup>49</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 71.

<sup>50</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 143.

America, and it signals the decline of the shortsighted view that "discrimination" can be isolated from related social problems."<sup>51</sup> In seeking the alleviation of years of political and economic repression through Civil Rights legislation, SDS was siding with the liberals of their time. An emphasis and trust in the system, that of institutional congressional actions, lent credence to SDS' belief in change through liberal avenues within established political avenues. By seeing Civil Rights as the vanguard movement of the era, which itself was based on liberal coalition building and the vote, SDS inserted themselves into the context of institutional change built upon by coalitions and regular voting schedules.

SDS also envisioned another crucial aspect to a grand alliance of liberal forces, that of labor. Recognizing the role that labor had played in the pre-war days of American radicalism, *Port Huron* saw the labor movement as vital not only for its past work, but also for its current relevance in regards to sheer numbers, influence, and guiding philosophy of improved living and working standards. Labor had, however, lost some of its driving idealism to elitism within the movement and come into an uneasy complacency with corporate America. Regardless, SDS continued to view labor as "the most liberal-and most frustrated institution in mainstream America."<sup>52</sup>

Labor, aligned with the Democrats for the latter's stance on the welfare state and worker's rights, was the most crucial alliance with the liberals in Washington. Labor Unions, such as the mammoth AFL-CIO, were a powerful lobbying force and voter block for their sheer numbers and ability to organize and mobilize. Although Union activism had taken a political sharp right turn and lost its revolutionary fervor after World War II, Labor was still viewed by both the liberals and SDS as a crucial force and ally for progressive causes. An

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<sup>51</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 153.

<sup>52</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 160.

alliance between the labor movement, the Civil Rights movement, and political liberals in a newly unified Democratic Party represented the kind of coalition politics and political alignment that the liberal establishment sought as their agent of change, facilitated through electoral, institutional avenues. SDS, therefore, inserted themselves as part of, and in favor of, liberal political action and change.

### **AHISTORICAL LIBERALISM?**

*The Port Huron Statement* has been analyzed by a number academics as a liberal document.<sup>53</sup> For *Port Huron* generation SDSer Bob Ross, however, one must take into account the political spirit of the Cold War status quo in order to understand the ideological constraints under which *The Port Huron Statement* was produced. As opposed to a purposefully liberal line, Ross argues that *Port Huron* was as politically far-reaching, as socialist as one could get in the context of the anti-Communist tendency in the U.S. Participatory democracy therefore, the driving ethic behind *Port Huron*, was about saying “socialism with an American accent;” promoting the ideology to the Left but articulating it in a way as to not offend American anti-Communist sensibilities. In defense of his position, Ross states:

“If there was going to be a new political force in ’61-’62 that was not social democratic and was not coming out of the CP [Communist Party], and was not marred by the sectarian and minority subculture of the cold war left, that that force, as represented by the Port Huron Statement, was as radical as it could be without being scarred by the cold war years.”<sup>54</sup>

Ross, while not disagreeing that *Port Huron* espouses a liberal line and demonstrates support for change through institutional means, sees the position paper within the context of a socialist trajectory, and an incremental step toward that trajectory. This argument is a sound

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<sup>53</sup> Including SDS historian James Miller who stated “By the mid-Sixties, it was difficult to read the revised *Port Huron Statement* and to find anything radically different from the positions shared by many mainstream politicians.” Miller, *Democracy*, 135.

<sup>54</sup> Ross, *CHP*, 10.

one indeed, especially given the scrutiny and the anti-Communist standards to which LID held the *Port Huron Statement*, and the concern which contributors gave to that opinion.<sup>55</sup> However, support for liberal political establishment, the traditional liberal coalition members, as well as the reformist goals of the aforementioned such as racial equality through legislation and economic security through welfare rights, all indicate approval for the institutional system of government in the U.S and the liberal establishment. And principle *Port Huron* author Tom Hayden, when confronted with this analysis, stated that participatory democracy as described in *Port Huron* was not socialism, nor was it socialism for many SDSers.<sup>56</sup> But, the Ross theory demonstrates the candidness and openness to interpretation that SDS was founded upon, and that while the organization sought to reform liberalism, they were also in dialogue with socialism.<sup>57</sup>

## **THE NEW INSURGENCY**

After the convention at Port Huron, the fall of 1962 proved relatively uneventful in the North, as the Civil Rights movement continued its actions with increased militancy in the South.<sup>58</sup> On October 22, however, the U.S was shaken by the thirteen-day standoff with the Soviet Union that would come to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. Initially, this event seemed to indicate to SDS that Kennedy was susceptible to the same Cold War status quo of military-industrial domination over geo-politics as his predecessors. While some would continue to hold this view,<sup>59</sup> the successful, and most importantly, peaceful resolution to the

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<sup>55</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 113-116.

<sup>56</sup> Hayden, *CHP*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> For discussion differing SDS interpretation of *The Port Huron Statement* and participatory democracy, see Miller, *Democracy*, 141-148.

<sup>58</sup> For more information on the southern Civil Rights struggle of the time, see Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle*.

<sup>59</sup> Ross, *CHP*, 11.

crisis seemed to indicate the possibility of détente and a move towards arms reduction between the U.S and the Soviet Union.<sup>60</sup>

At the December, 1962 conference in Ann Arbor, It became clear that a new document was needed to define SDS' analytical position relative to post-*Port Huron* developments domestically and abroad. Not only within the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, but also in reaction to the inspirational turn towards vanguard militant action on the part of Civil Rights groups such as SNCC, and a “lack of initiative” from the liberal establishment towards supporting the Civil Rights movement and cracking the Cold War status quo.<sup>61</sup>

This supplement to the *Port Huron Statement*, called *America and the New Era*, sought to challenge the liberal establishment. This new position paper echoed *The Port Huron Statement*'s call for an end to Cold War militarism, the championing of the Civil Rights issues and an extension of the welfare state. But while *America and the New Era* offered continuing support for liberals, it was in the context of a growing “new insurgency” of grassroots activists emerging post-*Port Huron* who would lead the movement in relation to liberals in Washington.<sup>62</sup> For Richard Flacks, one of the authors of the document, the liberal-labor partnership that SDS had promoted as leading the “new reform coalition” in *Port Huron* was not fulfilling its role in a time when “the sense of social crisis had grown.” Consequently, inspired by the activism of groups like SNCC, the potential for social movements to act as agents of change in the U.S seemed to be increasing as well. Placing a concise strategy for the implementation of their programs,<sup>63</sup> SDS and the new insurgency

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Flacks, email interview by author, March 21, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Flacks, interview by author.

<sup>62</sup> Flacks, interview by author.

<sup>63</sup> Ross, *CHP*, 10.

were to lead the “new reform coalition” towards progressive measures and “rewrite the nations agenda” to focus on domestic issues over Cold War militarism.<sup>64</sup>

In *America and the New Era*, SDS demonstrated an enhanced approval for the progress the Kennedy administration was making with Civil Rights, stating that the “Administration now views the civil rights situation as a major and profound crisis, demanding more commitment than initially hoped.”<sup>65</sup> While praising this progress, SDS also harshly labeled its effort to support the movement as token gestures to appease the growing anger and frustration surrounding Civil Rights.<sup>66</sup>

Concerning détente in the Cold War, SDS pressed Kennedy to pursue “a peace-making foreign policy in which disarmament is the central goal,”<sup>67</sup> *America and the New Era* kudos to the President for his continuing acceptance of non-alignment as a legitimate status in the Third World and his turn away from foreign policy through the lens of anti-Communism.<sup>68</sup> While Kennedy’s stance toward the developing world was indeed admirable, SDS called on his administration to bely the interests of corporations within the military-industrial complex, which were often at odds with decolonizing nations.

These corporations also had a negative influence on the domestic agenda of the U.S. Their influence, which was inherently profit driven, was in turn anti-social by nature and threatened welfare in the United States, especially that of the most vulnerable, perpetuating the oppressive status quo that facilitated firm driven politics and a regression in welfare and

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<sup>64</sup> Miller puts much of the focus of his analysis of *America and the New Era* on this latter point. Miller, *Democracy*, 182.

<sup>65</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, *America and the New Era*, 1963, 12, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan; Students for a Democratic Society, *America and the New Era* <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp29502> (accessed January 20, 2011).

<sup>66</sup> SDS, *America*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> SDS, *America*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> SDS, *America*, 10.

corporate regulation legislation. The Kennedy administration, SDS explicated, did not have nearly the kind of comprehensive program for poverty alleviation that was needed, and often acquiesced too much to business interests.<sup>69</sup>

In regards to Labor, SDS continued to assert the belief that workers represented a critical mass that would be needed for any kind of large scale democratic movement, especially given their radical past and their connecting of the economic and the political. “Issues now pressing the Labor movement,” described *America and the New Era* “seem to converge with those of urban negroes fighting for equality, and middle class groups working for disarmament.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, SDS continued to see labor as a positive and liberal force connected with other struggles for justice in the United States.

After analyzing the state of establishment liberalism, *America and the New Era* set out its strategy for change: pushing liberals towards progressive reform via the new insurgency. This new insurgency, made up of Civil Rights activists, middle class peace activists, university students, the poor, and militant industrial workers, would aim to recapture “the populist inheritance of liberalism” that encouraged debate, mobilized popular support, and organized disenfranchised populations. In this context, the new insurgency had one primary goal: to force debate and focus on the domestic agenda as opposed to the costly militarism of the Cold War.

*America and the New Era*, and its proposal of a new insurgency represents SDS’ relationship to liberalism in the political milieu of 1963. The position paper made it clear that there was increasing skepticism towards seemingly progressive liberal institutions within the establishment, as well as the promise and potential of liberalism to bring about a just

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<sup>69</sup> SDS, *America*, 11.

<sup>70</sup> SDS, *America*, 21.



democratic society. Was it possible to achieve radical change through the establishment with such heavy influence from revisionist forces of the corporate military-industrial complex? Was New Deal liberalism and its welfare state just a bandage over an inherently unjust and oppressive economic system, that in turn dissuaded democracy as influential sociologist C. Wright Mills suggested?<sup>71</sup>

*America and the New Era* made it clear that, although there was a serious role to be played by the new insurgency, liberals in political power were still a crucial aspect of the “new reform coalition,” even if they were not to lead it. The role of the new insurgency to petition elected officials to further progressive legislation demonstrated continuing belief in liberal avenues for democratic change. SDS therefore, saw a truly representative liberal Congress facilitating progressive legislation as the final piece of democratic renewal, although many liberals had yet to prove whether they were on the side of peace and domestic reform, or militarism and the Cold War. However, during this time of increased Civil Rights action and support from the Kennedy administration, as well as a nuclear test ban treaty on the horizon, it seemed that liberals could be persuaded by popular demand into supporting progressive reforms and thawing of the Cold War.<sup>72</sup>

## **THE DEATH OF KENNEDY**

On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1963, President Kennedy was felled by an assassin’s bullet in Dallas, Texas. Whether JFK’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crises had turned off an SDS radical,

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<sup>71</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 274 [http://books.google.com/books?id=Kn\\_OAuktbq4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=power+elite&source=bl&ots=tGrupKu0Sb&sig=7HuOdPYeC2K8POqCKxa5oBaBaKc&hl=en&ei=HyuUTf3bC8aw0QHTi\\_mEDA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCQQ6AEwADgK#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=Kn_OAuktbq4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=power+elite&source=bl&ots=tGrupKu0Sb&sig=7HuOdPYeC2K8POqCKxa5oBaBaKc&hl=en&ei=HyuUTf3bC8aw0QHTi_mEDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCQQ6AEwADgK#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed January 20, 2011); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* <http://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/power-elite.htm> (accessed January 20, 2011). Also See Miller, *Democracy*, 169.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, *Democracy* 182.

or that SDS radical had emboldened support for Kennedy after the introduction of détente with the Soviet Union, the affect of his death was monumental across the movement. Tom Hayden, reflecting on Kennedy's later politics, stated that, under his administration, many of the focal points of *Port Huron* almost came to fruition. Initially skeptical of the Civil Rights movement, Kennedy had "welcomed Civil Rights leadership to the White House...almost becoming "brothers" in the eyes of civil rights leadership" towards the end of his life. His original plans for the War on Poverty had included community organizing techniques, a staple of future SDS efforts in participatory democracy. There were signs that Kennedy was bent on ending the war in Vietnam by 1965, and that he had a serious interest in thawing the Cold War through a nuclear test ban treaty and other détente practices.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Kennedys death represented a definitive reshaping of the U.S political landscape of the 1960's.

Although the President's death caused turmoil amongst progressive forces in the U.S as to the fate of the progressive agenda, newly-inaugurated president Lyndon Johnson seemed to put the domestic-side of those fears to rest when he declared an "unconditional war on poverty in America" in January, 1964. It seemed, by launching this massive anti-poverty program, that Johnson had chosen domestic reform over the militarism of the Cold War, giving increased credence and optimism to SDS' first large scale action-based project to tackle the issue of poverty, the Economic and Research Action Project (ERAP).<sup>74</sup>

SDS, in a shift going from college-based intellectuals to community-based activists, started ERAP in September 1963.<sup>75</sup> In essence, ERAP's goal was to organize the poor in northern cities utilizing white, middle class college students as organizers. Its *de facto*

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<sup>73</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Miller, *Democracy*, 191-192.

<sup>75</sup> Todd Gitlin, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (September 16, 1978), 10. Also see Hayden, *CHP*, 8.

manifesto, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor?* was the brainchild of Swarthmore SDS leader Carl Wittman and Tom Hayden. In this position paper, the authors discussed the potential for an alliance of poor people of all races, upon which they could organize based on their shared economic experience as being members of the underclass. Embedded in their argument was the point that no group of people in the underclass was strong enough to organize based upon race alone, and that a mass movement of the poor could be formed as an avenue to place their demands on the American political system. To facilitate this, Hayden and Wittman called upon the poor to make class-centered demands as opposed to “race-centered” demands, the latter of which could lead to divisiveness.<sup>76</sup> The economic problems of the black community were viewed in this position paper as a problem of the greater underclass, which stated that eliminating discrimination will not solve the issue of joblessness and poverty in the black community.

In relation to the liberalism and its political power, this move towards organizing the poor as an agent of social change still recognized the importance of the liberal establishment. Indeed, SDSer Todd Gitlin stated that one of the main goals for the ERAP program was to “rejuvenat[e] liberal forces,” and the Hayden-Wittman paper signaled that liberal elected officials who would promote progressive causes was a “worthy bi-product of the movement.”<sup>77</sup> Hayden and Whittman recognized unions as a force for good in terms of economic change, but also acknowledged that the fight for Civil Rights and the poor was not the labor movement’s primary objective. However, unions were once again identified as the

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<sup>76</sup> Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor?* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1963), 6; Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor?* <http://www.sds-1960s.org/index.htm> (accessed January 20, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Hayden and Wittman, *Interracial*, 16.

most progressive group in the liberal establishment.<sup>78</sup> It was, consequently, a \$5,000 grant from the United Auto Workers that helped initially fund ERAP.<sup>79</sup>

While Johnson's War on Poverty centered the issue in the national dialogue and policy debate, SDS argued that it did not go nearly far enough. As stated in the position paper: "It is not a war that will be won, however, because it is not intended to redistribute power and wealth. The Johnson "war" will not create the aggregate demand, nor establish the public planning that is required for a solid onslaught on misery."<sup>80</sup> In this regard, the appropriations for the "war" were meager, the job training not large enough, and the massive tax cuts did not target the correct contingency.<sup>81</sup> This observation may well have derived from a growing feeling in SDS that helped spawn the activist ERAP: focusing on education and waiting for the liberal establishment to act was inadequate. If Johnson's War on Poverty was as far as the liberal establishment was going to go on poverty eradication, than SDS would take up the charge to push it further.

Although ERAP made great gains in the cities it operated in and transformed SDS' political philosophy into tangible actions,<sup>82</sup> the project was largely disbanded by 1965. Differing lifestyles between activists and the organized, organizational strains, and the realization that a commitment to creating a utopian community based wholly on participatory

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<sup>78</sup> Hayden and Wittman, *Interracial*, 23.

<sup>79</sup> R. Flacks, *CHP*, 15.

<sup>80</sup> Hayden and Wittman, *Interracial*, 26.

<sup>81</sup> "POVERTY IN EASTERN KENTUCKY, an intercollegiate conference to be held in Hazard, Kentucky from March 26<sup>th</sup> to March 29<sup>th</sup>, under the sponsorship of the Economic Research and Action Project of Students for a Democratic Society and the Committee for Miners," 2; Subject Vertical Files: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (4); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>82</sup> Sharon Jeffrey, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (October 1978), 11.

democracy was just too much of a burden for any individual to commit to.<sup>83</sup> For prominent SDSer Steve Max, the issue also lay with community organizing projects not placing enough emphasis on rallying established political parties who held the institutional power for change, whereas many community organizers were focused on extra-parliamentary actions.<sup>84</sup> In the end, the community organizing projects of ERAP demonstrated to SDS, in the words of historian James Miller, “the limits of face-to-face politics.”<sup>85</sup>

### **THE END OF WORKING WITHIN THE LIBERAL ESTABLISHMENT**

Following a year on intense violence and confrontation between the Civil Rights movement and the segregationist, racist political establishment all across the United States, SNCC organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Described by Tom Hayden as “the most important organized embodiment of the Port Huron hope for political alignment,” this was a black delegation from Mississippi attempting to gain recognition at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in order to break the all white domination of the Dixiecrats. The MFDP, by pushing Civil Rights upon the DNC, was also pushing realignment.<sup>86</sup>

The MFDP, however, was excluded from the convention by the very liberals whom the delegation and its supporters had invested their hopes in. Hubert Humphrey told the delegation that LBJ would not allow the MFDP’s Fannie Lou Hamers to speak at the convention because she was illiterate. The UAW president Walter Reuther, one of the most prominent figures in the labor movement as well as in the progressive liberal establishment,

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<sup>83</sup> Miller, *Democracy*, 212-213.

<sup>84</sup> Steve Max, “Words Butter no Parsnips: Remarks on the Nature of Community Political Organization,” 3; Subject Vertical Files: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (1); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>85</sup> Miller, *Democracy*, 211.

<sup>86</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 18.

was flown to the convention to convince the MDFP delegates to stand down. In the words on Tom Hayden: “the hopes of the early sixties were crushed once again, this time not by the clubs of southern police but by the hypocrisy of liberalism.”<sup>87</sup>

This extreme and direct betrayal by the liberal establishment whom New Left radicals had hoped to inspire toward a just and equal America caused many to finally give up on the idea of liberal political process.<sup>88</sup> The very politicians SDS and SNCC had hoped would push civil rights and Democratic realignment literally excluded the MDFP, whom manifested the best chance to bring that change. And in an added blow, labor was complicit in this betrayal as well.<sup>89</sup> Liberalism, and the political avenues through which reform could occur, had proved themselves irreconcilable to change, even by those who the *Port Huron* generation of SDS saw as their allies within the establishment. The liberal establishment facilitated change through coalition politics and voting, and if that establishment was not even willing to *seat* a voting coalition, blocking reform even when it came up through liberal-friendly channels espousing the views of liberals, what more could liberalism offer the New Left and SDS?

If betrayal at the 1964 DNC did not upend an SDS member’s faith in the liberal establishment, if they were willing to go “Part of the Way with LBJ” buoying by his promise not to escalate American presence in Vietnam,<sup>90</sup> it was the betrayal of the latter promise which finalized the break between SDS and the liberal establishment. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, the United States provoked an attack upon one of its warships in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam. Using this event as a catalyst, LBJ drafted and the U.S congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which drastically expanded U.S military forces in Vietnam.

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<sup>87</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Mark Rudd, Email interview by author, January 20, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Flacks would say that the betrayal of the MDFP by the political liberals and labor that was “most disillusioning.” Flacks, Interview by author.

<sup>90</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 21.

As American military presence mounted in the Southeast Asian country and the President's justification of the war came more into question, SDS organized the first anti-Vietnam War march in Washington. The march took place in April, 1965, and over 20,000 attended to protest the U.S governments action in Vietnam. The keynote speaker of the march was then SDS president Paul Potter.

In what would become a catalyst moment that propelled SDS to national prominence,<sup>91</sup> Potter delivered an address, which would come to be known as the "Name the System" speech, presenting a harsh critique of American foreign policy in Vietnam and challenges the narrative coming from the Pentagon concerning the morality of propping up an unpopular regime and suppressing the genuine socio-political ambitions of the Vietnamese people. While lambasting the blatant injustice of the war and militarism in the style of earlier SDS critiques of American foreign policy, Potter sees the events in Vietnam not as an unfortunate turn of events orchestrated as an organic policy response to the current geo-political situation, but as a logical event that sprang from something inherent in the American system.

In his speech, Potter identified the Vietnam War as something deeply rooted in the institutions, indeed the establishment, of American society. To Potter, the Vietnam war finally pulled back the current on the sham that is American foreign policy, severing "the last vestige of illusion that morality and democracy are [its] guiding principles."<sup>92</sup> Explicating that U.S foreign policy is neither moral nor executed to promote democracy, Potter then goes

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<sup>91</sup> "SDS: An Introduction," 3; Subject Vertical Files: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (1); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. This post-1968 document describes the April 17<sup>th</sup> march as such.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Potter, "March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam on April 17, 1965: Speech/by Paul Potter" (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, 1965), 1, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan; Paul Potter, "Name the System," *SDS Document Library* [http://www.antiauthoritarian.net/sds\\_wuo/sds\\_documents/paul\\_potter.html](http://www.antiauthoritarian.net/sds_wuo/sds_documents/paul_potter.html) (accessed January 20, 2011).

on to attack the idea of domestic democracy. Using Vietnam as his prime example, Potter describes how this dastardly war, executed in the name of the American people and using American taxpayer dollars, is virtually unanswerable to any of the available avenues of oversight, stating how dissent coming from the American people, news outlets, other foreign powers, and even the United States Congress has been able to halt the grinding gears of war.<sup>93</sup>

For SDS, this establishment, these institutions, and these liberals within the government have created, are proponents of an American system in which democracy cannot function, and thereby injustices are allowed to prevail. Acknowledging the crowd assembled in Washington that day, Potter notes that it is a multi-issue, diverse crowd, who represent the spectrum of dramatic domestic needs of the American people; where the real focus of a truly democratic and just government intent on preserving the life and happiness of its citizens would be trained. Echoing the sentiment of *America and the New Era*, Potter sees a grim picture for the future of movements set on bringing justice to the United States as the funds and means by which change could come about in regards to peace, abundance, and racial equality is systematically funneled towards an unjust and unanswerable war.<sup>94</sup>

Powerfully, Paul Potter goes on to call the audience to reflect upon, not only the anti-democratic way in which the war is being executed, but how that same kind of anti-democratic action so pervasive in American society today is the root of so many other social ills:

“What kind of system is it that justifies the United States or any country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? What kind of system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of

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<sup>93</sup> Potter, “Vietnam,” 3.

<sup>94</sup> Potter, “Vietnam,” 2-3.



American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values-and still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world?”<sup>95</sup>

Seven months later, then SDS president Carl Oglesby would answer Potter’s call to name the system that perpetuates oppression and limits democracy,: American “Corporate Liberalism.”<sup>96</sup> In his analysis, Oglesby grounds his argument that Corporate Liberalism is the perpetuator of oppression by presenting the paradox that those in government who have held the reigns of that American system have been liberals, and are at the same time, good, honest men. Liberalism, therefore is a system by which “good men can be divided from their compassion by the institutional system that inherits us all.”<sup>97</sup> It is this liberal system that stems progress for justice and racial equality, that “can send 200,000 young men to Vietnam to kill and die in the most dubious of wars, but it cannot get 100 voter registrars to go into Mississippi,”<sup>98</sup> which breaks the backs of the workers while lining the pockets of the rich, which sweeps up good men, and in the case of America a huge portion of the population, under the supposed myth of the promise of American Liberalism.

As named by Oglesby, this American Liberalism is in fact, a Corporate Liberalism. Corporate in the sense that, the actions of the United States and the liberal establishment are often influenced, or even dictated, by corporate interests. In his speech, Oglesby outlined the early Cold War interventionist history of the United States, from the CIA backed coup in Iran in 1953 to the U.S marine intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, and their connections to the corporate interests in the U.S. Not only where the liberal politicians

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<sup>95</sup> Potter, “Vietnam,” 4.

<sup>96</sup> Oglesby, “Future,” 4.

<sup>97</sup> Oglesby, “Future,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Oglesby, “Future,” 2.

complicit and guilty of executing intervention on the side of corporations, but so was the labor movement, the wing of the liberal establishment which SDS had the most faith in.<sup>99</sup>

For Oglesby, this Corporate Liberalism exposed the myth of the American Century for what is really is. It has gone under the name “white man’s burden,” had said convinced the west that they give the third world technology and bring them into modernity, but behind all its moral posturing the twentieth century, the establishment’s actions revealed that the myth of the American Century was nothing more than what it had always been, the gospel of expanding free enterprise, attempting to “sack the ports of Asia and still dream of Jesus.” In 1965, that excuse for the promotion of free enterprise took the form of anti-Communism. A revolution, a turn away from brutal capitalism, or a disruption of the international economic system that the west built around free enterprise in whatever form it may take is called Communism, and therefore must be defeated. For revolution, a call for democratic self-determination, is what the liberal establishment espoused, but which the American liberal system, Corporate Liberalism, could not allow.<sup>100</sup>

By the time of Carl Oglesby’s speech in 1965, a betrayal by the liberals in the U.S, who had “chosen Vietnam over the Mississippi Freedom Democrats,”<sup>101</sup> and Corporate Liberalism over creating a just foreign policy and focusing resources on the domestic injustices of segregation and poverty, had “frustrated and marginalized”<sup>102</sup> those in SDS who had faith in change through electoral politics and the liberal avenues of change. Carl Oglesby’s speech had demonstrated that the American liberal system was in fact, a system of Corporate Liberalism rooted in capitalist oppression, not justice and democracy. The myth of

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<sup>99</sup> Oglesby, “Future,” 3.

<sup>100</sup> Oglesby, “Future,” 4.

<sup>101</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 21.

<sup>102</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 21.

the American Century and the hope that SDS radicals had in the possibility of the current system to be the beacon of democracy that it espoused to be were crushed under the weight of Vietnam and racism, classist oppression. A system so powerful, yet so rooted in exploitation in the name of profit, cannot live up to its just ideals. Anti-Communism had revealed itself to be an excuse to defend this system by oppressing the democratic wishes of Third World peoples. With the failure of the liberal establishment and a revised look to the ideology of anti-Communism and the true nature of “Communist aims” of Third World people’s movements, the New Left sought another analysis of society and the means to affect change.

In this historiography, however, Kennedy presents a paradox. There is no doubt that Kennedy was one of the liberals that Oglesby was addressing in his 1965 anti-war speech. But, as noted by prominent members of SDS, it was not until the MDPF debacle and the engagement of the Vietnam War that an SDS member’s belief in institutional change and liberalism was shattered. As aforementioned, Tom Hayden noted Kennedy’s fraternal bonds with the leadership of the Civil Rights movement, and the signs that the President was bent on ending the war in Vietnam by 1965.<sup>103</sup> It is impossible to say how Kennedy would have reacted to these decisive issues presented to LBJ, but for many in SDS, the break between the Kennedy administration and the Johnson administration was huge.

Carl Oglesby, the author of the impassioned speech giving words to the feelings of despair with the liberal system, saw the death of Kennedy and the rise of LBJ’s militarism and reactionary stance toward issues of race and poverty as “the whole hinge of the Sixties,

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<sup>103</sup> Hayden, *The Way We Were*, 16.

and what made the sixties the trauma it was for all of us.”<sup>104</sup> In response to “apocalyptic sense” starting in 1963 amongst those in SDS, Oglesby stated:

“I think it all came with the death of Kennedy. ’63 is the year when promise flip-flopped and became death; Johnson, and war, and bullshit great society programs that didn’t do a damn thing except *build a corporate power structure* of the Democratic Party” [my italics added]<sup>105</sup>

SDSer Mickey Flacks, who was coming from a strong Marxist background during the early 1960’s and did not see much appeal to Kennedy and his mystique, could still recognize that Kennedy represented an open avenue for petition and reform. In an anecdote describing how the President sent out coffee for anti-war protesters outside the White House on an especially rainy day in 1961, Flacks remembers how, although JFK remained a politician, there was a sense of communication between activists and the Kennedy Administration, with White House officials even going so far as to have meetings the SDS chapter from Kennedy’s alma mater Harvard multiple times. “That sense of having a possible impact on the power structure, enabled you to be moral, and not hate your country” stated Flacks. “Later, that seemed to close up; no matter what we did, Lyndon Johnson did whatever he wanted to. That sense of communication, that sense of possible efficacy, had disappeared. We started spelling America with three K’s. Burning banks, and you know...In Kennedy’s time, it didn’t feel like that. It felt like there was room, there was possibility.”<sup>106</sup>

Indeed, whether or not a *Port Huron* generation SDSer gave whole hearted support to Kennedy or had their reservations, with the rise of the Johnson administration, it became

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<sup>104</sup> Oglesby, *CHP*, 16.

<sup>105</sup> Oglesby, *CHP*, 15.

<sup>106</sup> Mickey Flacks, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (September 25, 1978), 6-7.

clear that that generation of SDS was characterized by hope and promise. War, corporatism, and social injustice, the worst of liberalism's possible bi-products, all manifested themselves under the Johnson administration in opposition to the dreams of domestic reforms and a just foreign policy which Kennedy seemed possible to occur.

Much of SDS' grounding in liberalism was based on the promise of the kind of liberal Kennedy-esque politics which he demonstrated, if not in the man himself. Liberalism may not have been the root, radical solution to the dire issues facing the U.S, but, with the enigmatic John Kennedy in the seat of the presidency, reform through the system, and the mass appeal which it had to the non-radical U.S population, the rise of liberal, institutional reform to a level satisfactory to New Left radicals is not out of the question.

## Chapter Two: The Recourse of Marxism

*“And others will make of it that I sound mighty anti-American. To these, I say: don't blame me for that! Blame those who mouthed my liberal values and broke my American heart.”*<sup>1</sup>

-Carl Oglesby, “Let us Name the Future,” November 1965

With a crushed myth of the American Century, a failure of the liberal establishment, the identification of the American system as inherently unjust, and a revised look at Communism in the Third World, SDS began to take serious steps away from the hopeful message of *The Port Huron Statement* and liberal avenues of change. Analyzing the American political and economic scene in this way, New Left radical sought an alternative to creating a just and equal society. Since it had become clear that the establishment would be no partner in this goal, SDS began to seek out an alternative avenue of change, an alternative analysis of societal struggle and domination that would help bring about the just world envisioned in *Port Huron*. This new analysis, new tradition which SDS members were drawn to, was the class analysis of revolutionary Marxism.

This turn towards a Marxist analysis of society was not only happening in the student Left. During this same time, the rise of the Black Panther Party and the call of “Black Power” began to take the Civil Rights movement in a new, more militant direction with some embracing Maoism and a Marxist analysis. Several organizations of this time also emerged with this similar mixture of race/ethnic nationalism combined with militant Marxist revolutionary ideology. Internationally, national liberation movements, most notably in Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh and in Latin America by Che Guevara, propagated new and exciting ways of tackling domestic oppression, as well as countering the imperialism (occupation and resource extraction) of western powers with the goal of creating socialist

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<sup>1</sup> Oglesby, “Future,” 3.

nations in opposition to capitalist aggression and actions. Gaining prominence as the New Left sought to expand its class analysis and move toward a more Marxist and revolutionary ideology, the radical success of the Black Power and the Third World liberation movements greatly influenced SDS in their search for a radical analysis.

This turn towards a revolutionary Marxist analysis in U.S New Left circles and the rise of national liberation movements both at home and abroad occurred in a response to a number of factors. On the domestic front throughout the second half of the 1960's, increasing state repression of minority communities and the rising militant aspiration of the Civil Rights movement combined with the political establishment's focus on war and imperialism as opposed to poverty alleviation and social programs led to a rapidly sharpening critique of the U.S system and galvanized radical opposition groups. Aboard, the increasing militarization of U.S foreign policy, especially in Vietnam, created the atmosphere for the rise of Third World people's movements that opposed U.S, or U.S backed intervention in their nations. These interventions had begun to show their true nature; securing the dominant economic capitalist system and an economic regional stability which favored U.S and western corporations, regardless of the domestic aspirations, and in some cases, livelihood of the people. These foreign organizations spanned nations and continents, arising in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

### **MARXISM IN SDS PRE-1965**

While SDS began as an organization which saw liberalism and its available avenues for reform as the means to achieve a just American society, it is important to note that SDS was from day one in a dialogue with Marxist-influenced class analyses of societal problems. Its parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), was a labor organization

with a radical past even as it grounded itself in the politics of liberal reform and the language of American democratic determination. Founded as a socialist organization, LID “remained keepers of the socialist flame,” acting as “a kind of dignified retirement home for aging social democrats” whom had seen revolutionary politics betrayed, and now focused on institutional reforms.<sup>2</sup>

*The Port Huron Statement*, grounded in liberalism, reflected this dialogue with democratic socialism. There was indeed a place for socialists in the kind of movement for change SDS was trying to build, but in a distinctly social democratic approach which emphasized advocating “thoroughgoing reforms *in the system* [my italics added]” as opposed to the toppling of the American capitalist system in the context of revolutionary Marxism.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, SDS sought not only to include social democrats, but also at the very least not to exclude Marxists and Communists-those advocating revolutionary and radical change- from the participatory democratic process, regardless of how the first generation of SDS members may have felt about their political program.

### **NATIONAL LIBERATION INSPIRATION**

In June 1966, James Meredith, the first black student to enter the University of Mississippi, began a march from Tennessee to Mississippi to protest racism and encourage voter registration and participation. On the third day of the march, Meredith was shot by a sniper but survived. Outraged Civil Rights leaders from across the movement come out to finish the march, including SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael. In an address to the marchers on June 16<sup>th</sup>, Carmichael for the first time used the phrase “Black Power.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, *Democracy*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> SDS, *Port Huron*, 167.

<sup>4</sup> David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 17.



Electrified, this call for Black Power, a renewed look at the self-determination of black people in the U.S apart from the white majority, manifested the rage of the black community over continuing racial oppression socially and economically, even after *de jure* political oppression had been overturned by the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Indicating SDS' enthusiasm for the turn to Black Power, the National Council of SDS passed a resolution praising SNCC for adopting the phrase and its radical implications, especially the connection which it made with for both domestic and Third World oppression, only two days after Charmicheal's speech.<sup>5</sup>

Then, in October the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland, California by college students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Espousing a platform of black self-determination that included an end to economic and political repression as well as police brutality, the Black Panther Party quickly became the vanguard organization of the Black Power movement and of its turn towards militant demands and the radical reconfiguration of the American System.

In his September, 1966 article *What We Want*, Stokely Carmichael outlined what Black Power meant and how it was to be achieved. Accusing the Civil Rights movement of acting as a buffer between black anger and liberal whites, Carmichael analyzed U.S society by stating that racial issues were rooted in questions of both political and economic power, and that power must therefore be shifted from corporate white America into black hands for the black community to realize the promise self determination. Integration would not solve the issues of the black community, stated Carmichael, because that solution called for blacks entering white society, therefore devaluating black society and leaving those who did not

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<sup>5</sup> "Resolution on SNCC, Passed by National Council of Students for a Democratic Society," 18 June 1966; Subject Vertical File: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (4); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

make it out of the ghetto in the same dire circumstances as before segregation. What Stokely Carmichael and those who rallied under the banner of Black Power called for was the improvement of the Black community as a whole, through self determination in the social, political, and economic spheres.<sup>6</sup>

Third World revolutionaries would also have an increasing influence on SDS as the second half of the 1960's progressed. In January, 1966, Cuba brought together revolutionaries and freedom fighters from around the world, including Vietnam and other countries in which the U.S had intervened, for a Tricontinental Congress and to found the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. At the congress, Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara famously called for "two, three, many Vietnams," signifying the strategic plan of Third World liberation organizations to bring about violent revolutions in their countries to stretch the resources of imperialist powers into submission and eventual defeat at the hands of socialist revolutions in solidarity with one another.<sup>7</sup>

Guevara was no new comer to revolutionary Marxist politics. Beginning with his major role in the Cuban revolution of 1959, Guevara had become a leading figure in Third World liberation movements, spreading his ideology of solidarity and armed struggle across the globe. Guevara executed these struggles under the premise of Foquismo, or the *foco theory*. Under this theory, a small band of armed and committed revolutionaries could be the spark of

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<sup>6</sup> Stokely Carmichael, "Power and Racism: What We Want" (Boston: New England Free Press, 1966); Stokely Carmichael, "What We Want," [www.mnsd.org/mnhs/apush/unitXIV/Black\\_Power.pdf](http://www.mnsd.org/mnhs/apush/unitXIV/Black_Power.pdf) (accessed January 20, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 321.

a revolution.<sup>8</sup> This theory was rooted in Guevara's experience in the Cuban revolution, where the cadre of revolutionaries which he and Fidel Castro led were able to overthrow the U.S backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The use of violence in Third World revolutions such as the one in Cuba was further rationalized by Martiniquan psychiatrist Franz Fanon in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*. In this widely circulated text, Fanon presents an argument the psychological necessity of armed revolutionary struggle in the context of decolonization.<sup>9</sup>

The success of these movements and the real and seemingly viable alternatives they offered to the betrayed system of the American liberal establishment in creating a just society inspired SDS radicals, and played a large role in shifting the focus of SDS towards a class analysis based on Marxism in the context of revolutionary change. In *What We Want*, Carmicheal had called for the Black Power movement to create a non-capitalist society, with "the cooperative concept applied in business and banking."<sup>10</sup> The leadership of the Black Panther Party were even more avowedly Marxist and took great inspiration from Mao Tse-tung's *Little Red Book*.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, and other Third World revolutionaries sought to create socialist revolutions in their own countries, and organized their actions based on a Marxist-Leninist leadership format.

Of a Marxist analysis and the influence of it on SDS via these liberation movements, SDS/Weathermen member Mark Rudd stated:

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Rudd, "Che and Me," <http://www.markrudd.com/?violence-and-non-violence/che-and-me.html> (accessed January 20, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Rudd, "Che and Me." See also Fanz Fannon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Carmicheal, "What We Want," 4.

<sup>11</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 176-177.

“Marxism had already given us what appeared to be an extremely useful analysis of the war, racism, and the class structure in this country. The war was part of the grand scheme for global domination that the U.S. had been implementing since the end of World War II. U.S. imperialism needed labor and markets and natural resources (such as oil) and military bases with which to impose its rule. Opposing it were national liberation movements such as Vietnam’s and Cuba’s which were strong enough to not only challenge U.S. control but also to actually achieve liberation and revolution. We noted, of course, that these victorious revolutions were led by Marxist-Leninists.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Oglesby’s analysis of Corporate Liberalism in the context of U.S imperialism fit in with Lenin’s Marxist critique of imperialism, and, when combined with the vanguard actions of Marxist inspired black power and Third World revolutionaries, pointed SDS radicals in the direction revolutionary Marxist position and analysis as a viable alternative liberalism in creating a just and humanistic society.

## **THE AGE OF MARXISM**

By 1967, it was clear that the focus of SDS had shifted toward revolutionary politics. Greg Calvert, National Secretary of SDS during the time, told a reporter for the Guardian newspaper that the organization now required “a socialist analysis of capitalism to reinforce and give revolutionary substance to SDS’ existing libertarian rejection of a manipulative and exploitative American social system.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this kind of political language, with its rhetoric of socialism and revolution, is a marker for the changing attitudes in SDS towards a revolutionary Marxist program. Consequently, in the second half of the 1960’s SDS began a campaign of action and discussion on a Marxist analysis of American society and how they as actors fit into this burgeoning Marxist movements. One early attempt at this kind of analysis was the position paper *Toward the Working Class*, published in July of 1966. In this

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Rudd, “The Death of SDS,” <http://www.markrudd.com/?sds-and-weather/the-death-of-sds.html> (accessed January 20, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> Jack A. Smith, “SDS Aim: To Build a revolutionary consciousness,” *National Guardian*, April 15, 1967; Subject Vertical File: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (4); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

piece, SDS members Kim Moody, Mike Flug, and Fed Eppsteiner espoused a Marxist class analysis of U.S society which placed the working class squarely as the most important agent of social change in the U.S, citing their essentialness to the capitalist system as its foremost source of labor. Without excusing pervasive racism within some labor organizations, *Toward The Working Class* argued that a struggle of the working class against the system in which it had been so integrated into would cause revolutionary changes for everyone affected by the capitalist economic system. Consequently, centering other activists in a vanguard position, such as welfare rights organizations, would only affect peripheral changes to the capitalist system from which the oppression that affects all oppressed peoples stems from.<sup>14</sup>

In the words of historian David Barber, *Toward the Working Class* and other early attempts at incorporating Marxism into the idea of U.S socio-economic change “might just as easily have been written in Marx’s time as in the 1960’s.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this very classical analysis of the agency of change in the United States came up short for many in SDS, because of its failure to take into account the unique aspects of the socio-political and economic dynamics within the American System. Namely, this analysis failed to take into account the issue of race, the potential power of national liberation movements domestic and foreign, the imperialist structure of American capitalism, organized labor’s support for liberal establishment and by extension American capitalism, and the revolutionary potential of youth and students. Debate and controversy about how to incorporate these modern elements into the correct Marxist program for the United States would dominate the political discussion within SDS produce the factionalism that would eventually lead to the dissolution of SDS.

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<sup>14</sup> Kim Moody, Fred Eppsteiner, Mike Flug, and Hal Draper, *Towards a Working Class: A Position Paper for the New Left/ Why the Working Class?* (Berkeley: Independent Socialist Committee, 1966), 3, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. See Also Barber, *Hard Rain*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 78.

Early in 1967, SDS members David Gilbert, Bob Gottlieb, and Gerry Tenney sought to reconcile a Marxist analysis with the realities of American society and the strategic actors within it. The piece they produced, *Praxis and the New Left*, was part of a larger position paper entitled *The Port Authority Statement*, a comical nod to the founding SDS document *The Port Huron Statement*. Echoing earlier sentiments, *Praxis* stated that the social ills which the Civil Rights movement and anti-poverty action sought to cure stemmed from the American capitalist system which Vietnam and the lack luster domestic programs of the liberal establishment had exposed as inherently unable to bring about a just world.<sup>16</sup> A mass working class movement was needed to bring about revolutionary change in the United States, but, in an attempt to reconcile Marx with the potential of the student movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Praxis* presented the concept of a “new working class.” This new working class, comprised of students, youth, and young college graduates entering the job market, is based on the idea that this group was “becoming the most structurally relevant and necessary components of the productive processes of modern American capitalism.” Because of their crucial role as the technocrats of tomorrow who will sell their labor and occupy a similar position in relation to the means of production as the classical working class, this new working class, when combined with the industrial proletariat and the poor, would constitute a revolutionary force in the Marxist sense of revolutionary agency.<sup>17</sup>

*Praxis and the New Left* presented a shift away from attempts to apply classical Marxism to the realities of the United States by presenting the idea of the agency of students and youth within the framework of a class struggle. In May of the same year, the authors of *Praxis*

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<sup>16</sup> David Gilbert, Bob Gottlieb, and Gerry Tenney, “Praxis and the New Left,” *New Left Notes*, February 13, 1967, 6, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. See also Berger, *Outlaws*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert et al., “Praxis,” 5.

would take the idea of the new working class and place it within the framework of U.S imperialism and the struggle against the American Capitalist system in their position paper *Toward a Theory of Social Change in America*. In this paper, Gilbert et al. went into great depth to describe the system of resource and labor extraction from Third World nations for the benefit and profit of western corporations, a system which was maintained by and for the massive military-industrial complex. This imperialist system reinforced exploitation of the Third World and working class peoples, and maintained this exploitation through stifling self-determination or any political/economic actions which would hinder the accumulation of U.S corporate profit. The imperialist system of economic exploitation not only affected Third World peoples, but the investment in the military expenditures also greatly hindered a focus on domestic justice and prosperity as resources were diverted to maintaining the American empire. This phenomenon, and the position paper's analysis of it, echoed Oglesby's identification of Corporate Liberalism two years before.<sup>18</sup>

Reflecting a Marxist analysis, *Theory of Social Change* stated that the agents of that social change to topple the American system would be, once again, the working class, in concert with the underclass. This working class would include the industrialized working class, for their centrality to the American economic system, as well as their status as an "exploited class in society." The new working class, for their centrality to the economic system as well, would make up the other key aspect of a working class revolutionary group. This greater working class, in alliance with an underclass made up of disenfranchised minorities and the

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<sup>18</sup> David Gilbert, Bob Gottlieb, and Gerry Tenney, "Towards a Theory of Social Change," *New Left Notes*, May 22, 1967, 3-4, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. See also Barber, *Hard Rain*, 79.

poor who are especially susceptible to radicalization because of their detachment to the system, presented the agents of social change in the U.S.<sup>19</sup>

## **VIOLENCE AND CONFRONTATION**

This increasing rhetoric of a Marxist revolutionary analysis went hand in hand with a move from “protest to resistance” in SDS in 1967. This signaled a change in tactics within the organization, moving towards open resistance to the American System such as direct challenges to the draft and other “seditious” acts.<sup>20</sup> The new emphasis on resistance also occurred with an increase in violence and militarism in the U.S. In the summer of 1967, black ghetto rebellions erupted across 120 U.S cities, most notably in Detroit and Newark. During these rebellions, thousands were arrested, scores killed, mostly at the hands of the police, and property damage ran into the multimillions.<sup>21</sup> And while these ghetto rebellions seemed to galvanize the rage of black communities and the socio-economic conditions which they were forced to live in, those in SDS were profoundly influenced by its use of militant tactics and revolutionary implications.<sup>22</sup> “The Newark riot shows that troops cannot make people surrender.” Said Tom Hayden of the rebellion. “The conditions slowly are being created for an American form of guerilla warfare based in the slums. The riot represents a signal of this fundamental change...if people are barred from suing the sophisticated

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<sup>19</sup> Gilbert et al., “Praxis,” 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Jack A. Smith, “Report on SDS: Students Now Stressing ‘Resistance,’” *National Guardian*, April 8, 1978; Subject Vertical File: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (4); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. Vice President of SDS Carl Davidson is quoted as saying that SDS consciously made the decision to go from “protest to resistance” over “protest to politics,” demonstrating SDS’ dissolution with institutional change.

<sup>21</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 36.



instruments of the established order for their ends, they will find another way. Rocks and bottles are only the beginning...<sup>23</sup>

Hayden's analysis of the violence used during the rebellion and in a revolutionary context seemed to sync with the dominant view within SDS that true emancipation for oppressed groups could not be achieved through the processes of establishment liberalism. It had become clear to the leadership of SDS that revolutionary politics and action were needed to bring about the just society which they were fighting for. The use of violence in the ghetto rebellions of 1967 proved to be the catalyst event signifying to SDS the next step in ramping up the intensity of a revolutionary struggle; the use of violence and physical confrontation. Indeed, for those who would go on to form the more radical Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) within SDS, the struggle for black liberation was seen as the vanguard struggle within the context of a Marxist working class revolution.<sup>24</sup> The Black Panthers had advocated self-defense since their inception and were well known for their displays of weaponry, machismo, and confrontational politics. Che Guevara had called for violent armed struggle against U.S imperialism, and described the failure to do so as being complicit with colonial oppression. Franz Fanon had justified the importance of violence in anti-colonial struggle as well.<sup>25</sup> It became clear to SDS that to be on the cutting edge of revolutionary politics in solidarity with the vanguard actions of national liberation movements, a turn toward violent resistance was needed. "As people in SDS looked at their world," historian Dan Berger has

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Hayden, *Rebellion in Newark: Official Violence and Ghetto Response* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 67-69. See also Barber, *Hard Rain*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Jim Mellen, "More on Youth Movement," *New Left Notes*, May 13, 1969, reprinted in *Revolutionary Youth Movement: Towards a Unity of Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: Radical Education Project, 1969), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan; Jim Mellen, "More on Youth Movement," <http://marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/debate-sds/mellen-more.htm> (accessed on January 20, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Berger, *Outlaws* 46.

argued, “they found two common threads to any successful revolutionary struggle: the ideology of Marxism, and armed struggle.”<sup>26</sup> It became apparent that the spirit of the day called for both a Marxist program and analysis of society, and a commitment to armed struggle against oppressive institutions.

SDS was not the only domestic actors who saw this trend with a heightened critique of U.S imperialism. Martin Luther King, Jr. began to critique the Vietnam War and the U.S economic system which systematically oppressed disenfranchised people in the U.S and abroad.<sup>27</sup> His assassination, along with that of Robert F. Kennedy two months later, heightened the rage of many activists and seemed to signal the coming of a violent conflict between those who sought progress and those who sought to maintain the status quo. Indeed, the oppression that the Black Panthers were receiving at the hands of the FBI and their Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) vindicated the assumption of a violent, counter-revolutionary state action against progressive forces in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Emboldened by the armed revolutionary rhetoric of the national liberation movements and, increasing state repression against the anti-imperialist and nationalist organization domestically, SDS activists began to implement their strategy of moving from protest to resistance. In October of 1967 “Stop the Draft Week” in Oakland, California saw massive rioting and direct confrontation with police which, in the words of SDSer Karen Wald destroyed “...the sanctity of private property, and the sanctity (invulnerability) of the police...establish[ing] new goals, new criterion for success in what were clearly the early

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<sup>26</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> “SCLC Board Condemns War,” *National Guardian*, April 8, 1967; Subject Vertical File: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (4); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>28</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 120. Quoting David Gilbert.

battles of a long, long war.”<sup>29</sup> In the ensuing riot, helmet-clad protesters set up barricades in the streets and attacked police with bottles and stones as part of a massive national action against the Vietnam War.<sup>30</sup> In November of 1967, thousands of people converged on New York City to protest Secretary of State Dean Rusk, which also evolved into direct police confrontation and private property destruction in midtown Manhattan.<sup>31</sup>

At Columbia University in April, 1968, students occupied buildings on campus to protest the construction of an encroaching gym in their predominantly black Harlem neighborhood as well as military research being conducted on at the university. These militant events came to symbolize the height of student resistance to the Vietnam War and racism in the United States, as well as the state repression of those aspirations. Staging a sit-in occupation of university buildings as their means of a resistance strategy, the students held various buildings throughout the five-day strike, until the university called in the police who acted with “brutal enthusiasm, arresting more than 700 and beating everyone in site.”<sup>32</sup> For radicals in SDS, however, this was a catalyst event of student proactive resistance to the machinery of imperialist war and racism in solidarity with oppressed people, leading to the popular phrase of the time “two, three, many Columbias.”<sup>33</sup>

For the small cadre of militant SDSers who started the Columbia strikes with a group of black students, the actions at Columbia were not only revolutionary by implication, but

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<sup>29</sup> Karen Wald, “The Promise of Oakland,” *New Left Notes*, November 6, 1967, 2, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. See also Barber, *Hard Rain*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> BBC News, “1967: Thousands join anti-war movement,” *On This Day: 1950-2005*. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/20/newsid\\_3153000/3153144.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/20/newsid_3153000/3153144.stm) (accessed March 23, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 322.

<sup>32</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 50.

proved that Che Guevara's *foco theory* could indeed work in the United States.<sup>34</sup> For they, a militant vanguard group of young white students, had inspired thousands of white students by their actions to join the in building occupation. If a Marxist revolution was the goal of SDS action, than this kind of *foco theory* approach seemed to have vindicated itself as a tried and true method of social change.

### **THE BREAK BETWEEN THE NEW AND OLD GENERATION**

The mid-1960's and the crisis surrounding the war in Vietnam and the move from protest to resistance fundamentally changed SDS not just in strategy, but in polity. SDS, with its focus on decentralized governance and foundation in personal interactions was a difficult system of organization to maintain once the group's membership boomed in the second half of the decade. Early SDSer Bob Ross remembers a serious lack of trust between the generation who had penned *Port Huron* and those who joined on the issues of the anti-war movement. Having not lived through the hopeful period of early SDS, Ross noted "a new kind of bitterness" amongst second generation SDSers.

For Ross, as the organization boomed, the kind of "intellectual and theoretical structure" of the *Port Huron* generation was not translated to the new members. In the context of this far more separated SDS, it was indeed difficult to convey issues of tempering and planning political anger to a group who sought action without as much of the intellectual knowledge which was very much the base of a lot of the early SDS program.<sup>35</sup>

Jim Mellen, an SDSer of the second generation, while sharing Ross' view that the new generation was indeed filled with angst and lacked a strong intellectual base, saw the old generation of SDS as out of touch with the real issues that the U.S was facing. In tumultuous

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<sup>34</sup> Rudd, "Che and Me."

<sup>35</sup> Ross, *CHP*, 15-16.

year of 1968 while the Vietnam War raged and COINTELPRO actions intensified against the black liberation movement, SDS national leadership had no plan of action as to how the organization would respond. In the Ann Arbor chapter of SDS that Mellen belonged to during the time, the old guard leadership wanted to focus on issues of student power, such as abolishing the language requirement at the university. Opposing them was a new generation of SDS, made up of Mellen and other future Weathermen under the name the Jesse James Gang. This group took an action-oriented approach (showing preference for direct confrontational actions like “Stop the Draft Week”) and saw the black rebellions and the Vietnam War as the major issues of the time. When the Jesse James Gang finally took over the Ann Arbor SDS and represented the chapter at the national convention in Boulder that fall, chapters from all over the country wanted to know how this new guard were able to unseat the old. Signaling the growing desire of this massive influx of the second generation towards the issues which Mellen and his group represented, the confrontational, direct action-oriented Jesse James Gang and their allies were “vaulted into the national leadership in a minute.”<sup>36</sup>

### **SDS BEGINS TO CRACK**

As the Vietnam War raged and state repression against the Black Panthers increased, SDS began to feel an urgency to formulate a strategic ideology with the correct analysis and plan of action. The stakes were high as it appeared those who sought a just world free from oppression would soon come to clash with those exploitative forces that opposed them. Capturing the spirit of the day, Tom Hayden wrote in 1967: “We are at a point where

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<sup>36</sup> Jim Mellen, Personal interview, *Contemporary History Project*, interviewed by Bret Eynon (September 20, 1978), 8-11.

democracy- the idea and practis (sic) of people controlling their lives- is a revolutionary issue in the United States.”<sup>37</sup>

Within SDS in its strong turn towards Marxism, two main camps emerged, divided by the questions of the working class, nationalist movements, and youth’s relationship to the agency of change in the context of a revolutionary struggle. The Progressive Labor Party (PL) was a prominent Maoist faction within SDS that held firm to a platform of Marxism. They espoused that the traditional industrial working class, as Marx predicted, would lead the revolutionary struggle in the United States. Still seeing a role for students to play as future members of the working class (in regards to their relation to the means of production), the PL focused their attention on building a “Worker-Student Alliance,” which involved such activities placing students in factories and trying to organize the working class.<sup>38</sup>

By placing the industrial working class and a traditional Marxists analysis on the materialist origins of oppression, the PL rejected the nationalism expressed by the Black Power movement and other Third World liberation groups who sought to organize Marxist struggles for a socialist future based on nationality. Racism, argued the PL, can only be defeated within the context of a class struggle, and therefore all other forms of nationalism must be defeated to achieve this for they are an incorrect program for liberation.<sup>39</sup>

Imperialism and racism, for the PL, were rooted in the experience of working class oppression.

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<sup>37</sup> Hayden, *Rebellion in Newark*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, “SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance” (Chicago: Students for a Democratic Society, 1968), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>39</sup> “Fight Racism Build a Worker Student Alliance Smash Imperialism,” Resolution passed at the National Council Meeting of SDS, Dec. 27-Jan. 1. <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt7k4005q6&doc.view=content&chunk.id=d0e234&toc.depth=1&&anchor.id=0> (accessed January 22, 2011).

The largest anti- PL faction within SDS was the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM). Although by no means a united front, with members of the coalition disagreeing on the fundamental role of Marxism and the proletariat in a revolutionary youth movement, they were all supportive of national liberation struggles as an authentic form of revolutionary action, and therefore united against the PL's opposition to it. The leadership of RYM was drawn from three areas of SDS influence. First, from Chicago were Bernadine Dohrn and Mike Klonsky who held positions in the national office. Second, from Columbia University in New York were RYM leaders John Jacobs and Mark Rudd, who had led the catalytic occupation there. And third, drawing from the Mid-west region were the members of the Jesse James Gang, who had been so influential in positioning the action-oriented second generation of SDS in national prominence.<sup>40</sup>

In their founding position paper, *Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement*, RYM outlined a critique of U.S society that identified the pitfalls of capitalism as the root of oppression in the world. The main question now, stated position paper author Mike Klonsky, was to determine the correct relationship between youth and the working class in the context of revolutionary agency. Speaking on the oppression youth and their alienation from society via schools, the military, prisons, and other institutions of domination and control, Klonsky explicated on the revolutionary potential of youth in the U.S:

“An organized revolutionary youth movement is itself a powerful force for revolutionary struggle. In other words, our struggle is the class struggle, as is the Vietnamese and the black liberation struggle. To call youth or even the student movement a section of the bourgeoisie which must simply support any struggle fought by working people is economism. The struggle of youth is as much a part of the class struggle as a union strike. We ally with workers by waging struggle against a common enemy, not by subjugating our movement patronizingly to every trade union battle. We also ally with the liberation struggle of those

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<sup>40</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 11.

fighting against Imperialism, recognizing that this is the true expression of the working class at its most conscious level.”<sup>41</sup>

Adding special emphasis on “drop-out and forced-out youth,” RYM saw youth’s detachment from the system, enthusiasm, and organizing strength as a crucial factor in building a “full revolutionary working class movement.”<sup>42</sup>

While explicating on the role of a revolutionary youth movement, *Toward a Revolutionary Movement* also took up the topic of racism and organizing style of national liberation movements, directly challenging PL’s stance that “all nationalism is reactionary.” Of the black liberation movement, RYM states:

“In order to fight racism, we must recognize that there is a struggle being fought right now for black liberation in America with which we must ally. This fight for black liberation is at once an anti-colonial struggle against racism and the racist imperialist power structure, as well as being part of the class struggle because black workers are among the most oppressed. It is through racism and its development into colonial oppression that black people are maintained as the most oppressed sector of the working class. Racism (white supremacy) ties white people to the state by splitting them from the most aggressive class struggle.”<sup>43</sup>

Here, RYM is taking up their two primary issues with the PL critique of nationalism, and their unending support for the industrial working class in the U.S as an agent of revolutionary change. The black liberation movement, and by extension the Third World national liberation movements manifested the unique position with which minority members of the working class experienced oppression in drastically different ways than white workers. In fact, this oppression could come at the hands of white workers, as they gained material benefits from the oppression of black and third world peoples. In a paper written right before the eventual

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<sup>41</sup> Mike Klonsky “Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement,” Resolution passed at the December 1968 SDS National Council Meeting, 2, reprinted in *Revolutionary Youth Movement: Towards a Unity of Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: Radical Education Project, 1969), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan; *Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement* <http://marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/debate-sds/rym.htm> (accessed January 20).

<sup>42</sup> Klonsky, “Revolutionary,” 2.

<sup>43</sup> Klonsky, “Revolutionary,” 3.



split of RYM into two factions entitled *More on Youth Movement*, RYM member Jim Mellon further elaborated on this point concerning the importance of supporting the black liberation movements, even over the white working class, stating:

“The participation by white workers in the oppression of the black nation gives an anti-colonial aspect – in addition to the working-class aspect – to the struggle for black liberation. Fighting white supremacy is our first task. These two conditions, in addition to the high level of consciousness and militancy of the black colony, mean that at our point in history the black liberation struggle is the vanguard of the working class movement.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, RYM’s main qualms with the PL faction of SDS concerned their dogmatic application of Marxism to the potentially revolutionary situation in the U.S, attributing “to the struggle of industrial labor a centrality to the class struggle, or worse, they say that only industrial labor struggles are the class struggle.” The industrial working class had yet to prove themselves to be the vanguard section of the working class or to demonstrate a revolutionary consciousness, and, in the mind of RYM, it was foolish to ignore both the potential and real ability of youths and those organizing on the base of national liberation and Black Power to enact a revolutionary change.<sup>45</sup>

With the RYM faction of SDS accusing the PL as siding with white supremacy, the PL accused RYM of being reactionary to the Marxist revolution by supporting the national liberation movements, tensions came to a head at the 1969 Nation Convention of SDS in Chicago. Over the course of the convention, taunts, contrasting speeches, and even fistfights characterized the scene in the convention hall. On the second full day of the convention, RYM and future Weathermen founder Bernadine Dorhn led a walkout of RYM supporters from the plenary session. Setting up operations outside of the convention hall and the

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<sup>44</sup> Mellon, “More on Youth Movement,” 13.

<sup>45</sup> Mellon, “More on Youth Movement,” 13-15.

influence of the PL, RYM voted to expel the PL from SDS, splitting the organization and electing their own officers and agenda. The PL, themselves claiming to be the real SDS, did the same, but their version of SDS would not last far past the end of the convention.<sup>46</sup>

The question of national liberation movements, as well as the centrality of youth in the white anti-racist struggle in SDS, had been answered by the expulsion of the PL and the assertion of the Revolutionary Youth Movement as the political direction and program with which SDS would relate to the revolutionary struggle in the United States. Before the end of the year, however, the RYM block within SDS, united by its support for the role of national liberation movements in a revolutionary struggle, would itself break apart over the question of the working class and the classical Marxist revolution.

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<sup>46</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 85-86.

## Chapter Three: The Rise of the Weathermen

In the span of roughly seven years, Students for a Democratic Society had been betrayed by the promise of liberalism and institutional reform, attempting to reconcile their ideals for societal change in the context of Marxism and revolutionary politics. By 1969 however, it was clear that there was a growing contingency in SDS which was rejecting the Marxist alternative as insufficient in addressing the grave oppression that plagued ghettos in the U.S and developing nations abroad. The expulsion of the PL was a reflection of this. Dogmatic, the PL program stifled the revolutionary fervor of a New Left. A New Left who, with an expanding unjust war in Vietnam and such perceived victories as Oakland and Columbia, were at once emboldened and aroused by urgency towards the truly revolutionary task of ending that system of oppression. With the promise of liberalism betrayed and Marxism unable to produce effective recourse in the context of the realities of the U.S, those who would become the Weathermen formed their own program and analysis that sought to reconcile and realize their demands for justice.

Although united against the PL, the Revolutionary Youth Movement itself had divisions in it, represented by the Weathermen/ RYM I and Revolutionary Youth Movement II. The Weathermen were the numerically dominant faction, and led by Bernadine Dohrn from the National Office in Chicago, Bill Ayers of the Michigan-Ohio region, and Mark Rudd from New York/University of Columbia. RYM II was led by Les Coleman, Noel Ignatin, and “Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement” author Mike Klonsky.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 157.

In July of 1969, RYM II published a separate position paper from the Weathermen, entitled *Revolutionary Youth Movement II*. In this work, the RYM II leadership delivered a traditionalist vision of a socialist revolution, with the industrial proletariat in the vanguard role. Youths, however, would join the proletariat “in the front ranks of all phases of the struggle,” and RYM II analyzed support the national liberation of oppressed peoples as “a precondition to any kind of socialism.”<sup>2</sup>

In their analysis of U.S socio-political and economic society, RYM II took the position that it was the industrial proletariat of the working class which held the power as the agents of change because of their fundamental importance to the means of production, and therefore the profit of the bourgeoisie. RYM II did, however, recognize the reactionism of many working class peoples, stating that “many of the main forces in the country which could be brought to oppose the imperialists now side with the imperialist against the oppressed nation.” A vague assertion, this statement is a token gesture to the very real violence and hostility which many New Left radicals encountered when trying to organize against the war and imperialism amongst working class groups in the 1960’s.<sup>3</sup> Comfortable in the secure middle class lifestyle which the post-war economic boom had offered them, Many working class individuals supported the established order, and thus provided evidence of the inadequacy of idealistic faith in the revolutionary potential of Marx’s working class.<sup>4</sup>

RYM II saw as a “pre-condition” to a true revolution the radicalization of the industrialized proletariat to rally against imperialism and support the self-determination of

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Klonsky, Noel Ignatin, Marilyn Katz, Sue Eanet, and Les Coleman, “Revolutionary Youth Movement II, *New Left Notes*, July 8, 1969, <http://marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/debate-sds/rym2.htm> (accessed November 15, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Alan Wald, interview by author, January 11, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Weather would espouse further on this point, and it would stand as one of the founding principles of their political ideology

oppressed peoples. The youth of America, holding revolutionary potential because of their detachment from the U.S socio-political and economic system, were charged with leading a movement to attack imperialism, principally in an effort to “win” the proletariat to the side of revolution. For the activists of RYM II, youth were indeed to be integrated into the revolutionary force, but it was Marx’s proletariat that would lead the revolution.

### **THE WEATHERMEN AND THE BREAK WITH MARXISM**

In establishing their own political ideology in 1969, the Weathermen also produced a position paper, titled *You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows*, named after a popular Bob Dylan song of the time. Identifying the primary struggle in the world as existing between U.S imperialism and the national liberation movements that opposed it, the Weathermen positioned themselves firmly on the side of Third World peoples. Accordingly, in their goal of overthrowing imperialism, the Weathermen stated that “we determine who are our friends and who are our enemies according to whether they help US imperialism or fight to defeat it.”<sup>5</sup> For the Weathermen, the real material benefits and privileges with which nearly all the working class receives from imperialism tied them to the system. These benefits were short range and most present during times of prosperity, but in the revolutionary fervor of the time, if you supported the system or even did not support the revolution, you were guilty of collaborating with the oppressor. All white Americans, from the poor underclass to the capitalist, received benefits from the imperialist system, and were thus complicit in American Imperialist oppression under a Weather analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> Karin Asbley, Bill Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn, John Jacobs, Jeff Jones, Gerry Long, Home Machtinger, Jim Mellen, Terry Robbins, Mark Rudd and Steve Tappis [Weathermen], “You Don’t Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” *New Left Notes*, June 18, 1969, 1, <http://marxists.org/history/erol/nem-1/debate-sds/index.htm> (accessed November 15, 2010).

By forsaking nearly the entirety of the working class, the foundation upon which the Left had built their agents of change for over a century, the Weathermen had turned their backs to the entire Marxist intellectual tradition of agency in the context of revolution. The Weathermen foresaw the goal of the revolution still to be world communism set in an anti-imperialist and anti-racist framework, but achieved through revolution that would come about without the hammer of the industrialized proletariat or the sickle of the peasant/poor.

While white America seemed to be collaborationist with U.S imperialism, the black and Third World liberation movements represented a vanguard role in defeating the oppressive force of U.S imperialism and white supremacy in the world. Indeed, where liberals and dogmatic Marxists had failed to provide a program or direction for the Weathermen, the leaders of national liberation movements did.

Demonstrating their loyalty and belief in the revolutionary potential of the black liberation movement in the United States over class-based Marxist organizing, Weather stated that the black population does not have a “dual interest” identity - one as black people, the other as part of the U.S working class - but rather solely as part of the black community. Therefore, the black community in the U.S had the right of self-determination for themselves given their specific experience with domestic imperialism and white supremacy. It was legitimate, therefore, for the black liberation movement to organize apart from the rest of the working class, who had been complicit in the oppression which they and their international brothers had faced.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Weather argued that the black population existed in solidarity with the Third World in opposition to imperialism because they themselves shared the experience of being at the oppressive end of imperialism as a colonized people. The “black colony” within the

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<sup>6</sup> Weathermen, *Don't Need a Weatherman*, 3.

United States, made up of both black communities in the South and urban North, essentially functioned as an internal colonial enterprise, with resource extraction, a law enforcement organization which came largely outside of the community, and a serious lack of political, social, and economic self determination.<sup>7</sup> The black liberation movement, as a national liberation movement, was therefore primarily responsible for ending the oppression of their communities of the black colony, which, for all intensive purposes, existed apart from the rest of white America.

These movements of national liberation, from Vietnam to black America, operated within their specific nations in the goal of emancipation for imperialist oppression, while at the same time acting in solidarity towards worldwide Communism. Within the territorial bounds of the U.S, therefore, it was the domestic liberation movement, that of the black liberation movement, which acted as the vanguard. However, under the analysis of the Weathermen which saw black America as a black colony, its own separate entity within the United States, the Weathermen effectively viewed the struggle of black people in the U.S, and the vanguard movement which fought it as representing that colony. By identifying black communities and the black liberation movement as extra-domestic, the Weathermen effectively left white America and those areas outside of minority communities without a vanguard revolutionary leadership.

Who would step into the role of leading the revolution in America if the black liberation movement (as well as other Third World people's movements) were removed from the analysis of revolutionary struggle in white America? For the Weathermen, the answer was themselves; the white, "new working class" youth.<sup>8</sup> While the rest of the working class had

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<sup>7</sup> Weathermen, *Don't Need a Weatherman*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert et al, "Praxis," 5.

been compromised in the short term because of the material benefits received from imperialism, white youth, in the Weather analysis, remained unattached to the system. The threat of the draft, unemployment, and fewer stakes within the system, such as debts and a history of job employment, left white youth alienated from the system in precisely the ways the rest of the working class was tied in. White youth, argued Weathermen, were also the most open to new ideas of revolution, because they were yet to be fully brainwashed by the establishment.<sup>9</sup>

“It is not that life in America is toughest for youth or that they are the most oppressed. Rather, it is that young people are hurt directly-and severely- by imperialism. And, in being less tightly tied to the system, they are more “pushed” to join the black liberation struggle against U.S imperialism. Among young people there is less of a material base for racism- they have no seniority, have not spent 30 years securing a skilled job (the white monopoly of which is increasingly being challenged by the black liberation movement), and aren’t just about to pay off a 25-year mortgage on a house which is valuable because it is located in a white neighborhood.”<sup>10</sup>

Youth, in their detachment from the system and desire for rebellion--manifested in a disillusionment with the American system and a move towards the counter-culture--were white America’s agents of revolutionary change.

Crucial to this analysis was Weather’s use of the new working class ideology to couch their political program in a Marxist framework, while forsaking Marxism’s main classic agents. The Weathermen identified any white youth who were students or planning to enter the job market in non-ownership positions (in terms of their relationship to the means of production) as members of the “new working class.”<sup>11</sup> This definition of working class played two important roles for the Weathermen. First, it allowed for them to come into solidarity with a much larger proportion of white American youth regardless of income

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<sup>9</sup> Weathermen, *Don’t Need a Weatherman*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Weathermen, *Don’t Need a Weatherman*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Weathermen, *Don’t Need a Weatherman*, 13.



(many of the Weathermen came from middle class and upper middle class backgrounds).<sup>12</sup>

Second, it based their analysis in a Marxist critique, while at the same time defying Marxism by forsaking the majority of the traditional working class. While Weather's strategy of revolutionary struggle in solidarity with Third World movements would (theoretically) eventually grow to include the majority of the working class including the industrial proletariat, it did not mean that the Weathermen needed the majority of the working class on board to be a revolutionary vanguard movement. Still concerned with vindicating their program within the Marxist framework while at the same time removing its classical agents of change, Weather stated a caveat to their eventual plans to bring in the industrial proletariat to cause of revolution:

“But this should not be taken to mean that there is a magic moment, after we reach a certain percentage of the working class, when all of a sudden we become a working-class movement. We are already that if we put forward internationalist proletarian politics. We also don't have to wait to become a revolutionary force. We must be a self-conscious revolutionary force from the beginning, not be a movement which takes issues to some mystical group-“THE PEOPLE”- who will make the revolution.”

Internationalist Marxist politics grounded the Weathermen in its revolutionary analysis, but their approach to agency refused to hold off on revolutionary actions regardless of the mass sectors of the working class who were not fully supportive of their efforts.

The Weathermen's approach to organizing this vanguard party of youth was, in the words of historian David Barber, actionist. The Weathermen, opposed to trivial Marxist debates on correct revolutionary agency and other roadblocks to the beginning of a revolutionary movement, favored immediate and direct confrontation of oppressive forces in the name of an expedited revolution. In their position paper, the Weathermen presented a strategy for revolutionary action that revolved around organizing white youth towards anti-racism by

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<sup>12</sup> Bob Ross notes that Bernadine Dohrn and Bill Ayers were “upper class types.” Ross, *CHP*, 8.

bringing them together in neighborhoods and cities for different “fights,” i.e confrontations with the establishment and oppressive institutions such as schools and government entities.<sup>13</sup> Putting Che Guevara’s *foco theory* to the test in the context of their revolutionary program, the Weathermen used these fights and direct attacks on oppressive entities which affected the lives of white youths to show their ferocious commitment to the struggle through physical confrontation, in the hopes of garnering support from the white working class youth population.<sup>14</sup> In a plan for a demonstration in Washington on the day of Richard Nixon’s 1969 inauguration, the Weathermen, still identifying as SDS, stated part of their reasoning for this tactic:

“Many new people were attracted to sds on the basis of the militancy of Columbia and Chicago. These people, many of whom are young working class guys and people in schools the movement has never touched before, [could] not relate to sds as an isolated group of protesters and pacifists, but find the existence of a struggling movement encouraging and important. This action will, through its militancy and clear political focus, deepen the commitment and consciousness of, as well as provide a definite direction for, our movement.”<sup>15</sup>

Besides the example of the Columbia and Chicago demonstrations, this kind of heroically confrontational actionism had proved affective in the Michigan-Ohio region as well. After the Jesse James Gang had taken over the Ann Arbor SDS chapter, they were able to build a regional support group of 5-10,000 members in the mid-west, gaining a following through their style of confronting authority, starting rallies, and giving speeches unannounced on small campuses.<sup>16</sup> Weatherman Jim Mellen remembers these events having “the ability to

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<sup>13</sup> Weathermen, *Don’t Need a Weatheman*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 173.

<sup>15</sup> Karin Ashley, Bill Ayers, Pheobe Hirsh, Johnny Lerner, Terry Robbins, Mark Rudd, Mike Spiegel, and Bill Willet. “Foggy Bottom Breakdown: Nixon’s Inauguration or the Pig’s Parade,” 3-4; Subject Vertical File: Youth and Student Protest-Students for a Democratic Society (4); Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>16</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 12.

excite people but did not necessarily give them an opportunity to learn or develop a more thorough point of view.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, if the Weathermen were weak on transferring their substance or message to the larger white population, they certainly were excellent at charismatic leadership, and one of the founding essences of the organization’s program; bravado. Part of the mystery and excitement surrounding the Weathermen, besides their original rhetoric and actionist program, was the charisma of an organization that could not seem to be set back and was always pushing forward no matter what the consequences.<sup>18</sup>

The actionist bravado of the Weathermen was heavily influenced by the romanticism of revolution as well. Mark Rudd recalls the “Cult of Che” in the Weathermen; the desire to show the fearlessness of the “male hero” who practices violence, dies in the name of the revolution, but is eternally remembered as an example of bravery and commitment to the cause. For Weather, their violent struggle also reflected a need to prove themselves as revolutionaries in line with the armed Third World liberators that they idealized. Indeed, when the Weathermen sought to bring the working class youth into their struggle, their actionism drew on a program to “out-macho white working-class youth, and by out-machioing them, win them to anti-racist politics,”<sup>19</sup> This culture of hyper-masculine violence, in the words of Mark Rudd, created “a macho nightmare.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Rudd, “Che and Me.”

While this kind of “hero as the political activist” inspired many young radical actors to the actions of the Weathermen<sup>21</sup> by March of 1969, this kind of bravado had nearly gotten out of control. Guerilla tactics, quick strikes and then retreat to fight another day, had been taken over by a culture of ultimate machismo and romanticism with actions that seemed more about dying heroically than the seeing the struggle through.<sup>22</sup> Already limiting their revolutionary base to the white working class, there was a sharp increase in elitism within the vanguard organization, and being in the Weathermen became “a giant ego trip for a number of people.”<sup>23</sup> The strategy of the group became very much concerned with proving that their politics were superior to all others, with increasing shows of intensity and violence for the purpose of showing their above and beyond solidarity with the revolutionary national liberation movements.

This elitism built upon bravado, confrontation, and spontaneity would spell the end for Students for a Democratic Society. In January, 1969, the Weathermen closed of the national office of SDS in Chicago, and, throwing out the names lists and trashing the office, affectively disbanded the organization. Jim Mellen remembers this action coming as a complete surprise, and views it as a demonstration of the outrageous culture of decision making within the Weathermen. By this time, after a decision was made by one person in the organization, no matter how outrageous, it had to be followed by everybody in the name of never taking steps back and always pressing forward.<sup>24</sup> Rudd, on the other hand, saw it as a more calculated maneuver, with the Weathermen destroying SDS because, like so many

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<sup>21</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 35. Jim Mellen notes how protesters would listen to him no matter what he said, and, because of that power as a weatherperson and the leader of a violent group, was the target of police threats of violence and death.

<sup>22</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 29. In this interview, Mellen also attributes the removal of the PL from SDS in part to this kind of strategic decision making as well.

other left leaning groups in the 1960's its membership was not "radical enough," as evidenced by its unwillingness to sign on to Weather's program of violent revolutionary struggle.<sup>25</sup>

### **AN ANTI-INTELLECTUAL IDEOLOGY?**

In the historiography of the Weathermen in the context of the demise of SDS, it has become common to paint the Weathermen as an organization without a political ideology. SDS historian James Miller for instance, has deemed the Weathermen a group practicing "Pseudo Marxist cant."<sup>26</sup> While the Weathermen may have put down other ideologies and groups as solely interested in political theory,<sup>27</sup> this "anti-intellectualism" must be put into the context of the actionism and counter-cultural program of the Weathermen.

By its actionist nature, the Weathermen placed more emphasis on "reality" than they did on theory, because to the Weathermen, theory lent itself to inaction. The Marxists sects which the Weathermen broke with, for instance, mandated waiting for the industrial proletariat to gain a revolutionary class consciousness before bringing about revolution in the U.S. This was an unacceptable doctrine to the Weathermen, who saw the overthrow of U.S imperialism as an immediate need to end the violence and dire oppression of Third World peoples.<sup>28</sup> The Weathermen, in their belief in an impending revolution and the need to bring it about as fast as possible, lashed out against these constraining theories. In the heightened revolutionary rhetoric of the day, this aversion to theories meant an aversion to the traditional Marxism which the Weathermen had deviated from. Jim Mellen remembers that "people saw us as a threat, but as a mindless threat, because I was the only one among ten of fifteen

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Rudd, "Anti-imperialism and its Discontents."

<sup>26</sup> Miller, *Democracy*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Rudd, "Anti-imperialism and its Discontents."

<sup>28</sup> Rudd, "Anti-imperialism and its Discontents."

people who had any background in Marxism. I was the only one who had the ability to put our actions and ideas into some kind of coherent ideological framework.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, coming out of the era of sectarian Marxism in SDS, one’s theoretical position was judged based upon their grasp of theoretical Marxism. Historian James Miller, commenting bitingly on the “intellectualization” of SDS in the late 1960’s, stated that “Marxism became a tool seized on by both sides [of a debate], not only as a theory for interpreting the world, but as a weapon of an internal power struggle.”<sup>30</sup>

The majority of the Weathermen however were not concerned with Marxist theoretical frameworks, as Marxism was not seen as the guiding theory for Weathermen. Mark Rudd, when prompted to describe the theoretical background for the Weathermen, stated: “it was the theory of the rise of the global anti-imperialist movement, centered on national liberation movements in the Third World and in internal colonies, and the inevitable victory of that movement over US imperialism,” going on to add “we were very much adherents to a strategic theory, foquismo.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the Weathermen strategy was based largely on leading through exemplary action and sparking the imagination of the larger populace to anti-imperialist politics. Reflecting on the result of an action against Nixon on his inauguration day, the Weathermen stated “we believe that the issues of imperialism and racism are the same issues we should be dealing with on campuses & in cities. Thus the action in Washington can prove focus & impetus to local organizing against racism, military, imperialism etc. As well as being an additional means of presenting our politics, exposing the system, and putting those politics into clear, militant action.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Democracy* 284-285.

<sup>31</sup> Rudd, “Anti-imperialism and its Discontents.”

<sup>32</sup> Karin Ashley et al, “Foggy Bottom,” 4.

Weathermen theories, however, were often lost upon activists due in part to Weather's proclivity for radical actionist language and attention grabbing rhetoric. A perfect example of this is the turn from a slogan of "serve the people" to that of "fight the people." An anecdote described to historian Bret Eynon by Jim Mellen.<sup>33</sup> One of the strategic responses which the Weathermen had to criticism was to ridicule that criticism in their public persona. One of the critiques of the time was that, while the Weathermen advocated a slogan of "serve the people," through their vanguardist rhetoric and actions they were in fact "fighting the people." Bill Ayers, proposed the switch to ridicule their adversaries. But while this slogan was also supposed to be grounded in truth, that many people were anti-revolutionary supporters of the establishment and the Weathermen were opposed to them, the slogan was understandably translated to the public as the absurd idea that the Weathermen's goal was in fact to just fight the populace in general.<sup>34</sup> Jim Mellen, reflecting on the issues, stated that "what we really needed was a clear-cut, strategic conception of who we were fighting for and who we were fighting against, or to what extent we were fighting against somebody and to what extent you were fighting against what they conceived to be their interest." Consequently, these positions were never well defined to the non-Weathermen public. Because an individual had to be able to pick up on their wonderingly articulated program or be drawn in by their penchant for immediate actionism, a turn towards this kind of rhetoric was one of the demises of the Weathermen on a mass scale.

As a preface to the plan for the Nixon Inauguration action, the Weathermen stated: "We wish to make it clear that we believe the key time to present our politics is in organizing for the action, and in interpreting it afterward. The emphasis should not be on calling people

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<sup>33</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 36.

together to fight the pigs or grab some turf...but on coming together to make certain crucial political points; support for the NLF and DRV, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, meaning of law and order—to accomplish the specific objectives mentioned above.”<sup>35</sup> In reality, however, nearly all of the attention was focused on the action itself, and political thought behind the action, as well as interpreting it after, was also often lost. As Jim Mellen says of the Weathermen’s action-theory paradigm: “We encouraged a lot more anti-authoritarianism than positive or rigorous understanding of strategy for the world. Anti-authoritarianism can be very empty.”<sup>36</sup>

### **THE FAILURES OF LIBERALISM AND MARXISM**

When the Weathermen emerged as an organization in the late 1960’s, it appeared to them as if a revolution in the United States and across the globe was imminent. Heavily influenced by their perceived counterparts in the Black Panthers and Third World liberation movements, the Weathermen strongly believed that if you didn’t take up arms to support Third World peoples, or at least support those who did, you were taking advantage of your white skin privilege by letting people of color fight the battle for a Communist world.<sup>37</sup> The Weathermen, driven by their anger and despair at the oppression in the world occurring because of U.S actions, sought to join in solidarity with these other movements as the white fighting force of the revolution. In doing so, they formulated a political ideology that facilitated their taking this vanguard role in white America.

This political ideology had three main components. First, the Weathermen saw the end goal of their political program as Communist world order. Second, the Weathermen analyzed

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<sup>35</sup> Karin Ashley et al, “Foggy Bottom,” 4.

<sup>36</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Hayden, “The Importance of Community Organizing: From the Peace Corps to Barack Obama,” *Peace Corps 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration*, Ann Arbor, October 14, 2010.



the oppressive forces in achieving their end goal as U.S imperialism and white supremacy. And third, the Weathermen put forth a program of revolutionary armed struggle by a vanguard cadre of white youth acting in solidarity with national liberation movements.

In following the history of political ideology within SDS, the development of Weather's analysis and program begs the questions: why did the Weathermen need to develop their own political ideology, and specifically, why did U.S liberalism and classical Marxism fail these revolutionaries? Could either of these ideologies been affective avenues to enact social change given the circumstances surrounding the rise of the Weathermen?

While it may be easy to write off a support for liberal avenues of change after 1965 considering the mass ideological swing within the New Left towards revolutionary anti-establishment politics, liberal political strategies were leaking back into the New Left in various ways. Faced with heightened government repression and put on political defense, the Black Panthers called upon SDS and other groups which offered tacit support to them to not enact revolutionary struggle (One Panther referred to the Weathermen's "Days of Rage" in Chicago as "Custeristic"<sup>38</sup>), but go into white communities and build coalitions surrounding anti-racism and a community based police force,<sup>39</sup> representing the kind of progressive-radical coalition building program which bordered on liberalism. In the anti-war movement, liberal activists had taken the vanguard position, organizing a 2 million person march against the war in Vietnam in October of 1969. A broad base of support existed against the war by the liberal-leaning populace, but they were unwilling to take up arms in a revolutionary context, as the Weathermen demanded.<sup>40</sup> In a meeting with Vietnamese National Liberation

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<sup>38</sup> *The Weather Underground* (2002), Netflix, directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel.

<sup>39</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 170. Referencing the United Front Against Racism conference of 1969, organized by the Black Panthers.

<sup>40</sup> Barber, *Hard Rain*, 187 and Rudd, "Anti-imperialism and its Discontents."

Front members in Havana, Cuba in 1969, the NLF leaders expressed a wish to see exactly that kind of broad-based anti-war/anti-imperialist organizing to facilitate a quick American withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it seemed from many different directions that a more moderate and broad-based coalition movement was being called for.

The Weathermen, however, rejected a turn back towards liberalism and its political program of working within the established avenues of change in the system. Liberalism, with its end goal of placing reforms the established order to create a more equitable society, had proved to be a fallacy. The established system, that of Corporate Liberalism identified by Oglesby in his 1965 speech, was irreconcilable towards bringing actual justice to U.S policy, both foreign and domestic. In Weather's view, it was a system that, as such, allows good men to do terrible things, like start the Vietnam War and acquiesce to U.S corporations over foreign populations. As such, liberals did not see oppression as a result of militarism and economic disparities stemming from the establishment itself, but rather from amenable defaults from within the system.<sup>42</sup> Liberals believed that the answer to justice lay within the liberal establishment, while the Weathermen and SDS members before them had found the establishment, in fact, to be the oppressor.

Finally, liberalism failed the Weathermen because they did not agree with its method for achieving political and social change. Electoral politics was a process which seemed to have produced nothing but the status quo, matter how liberal the politician in office. In the utter urgency of ending oppression at the hands of white supremacy and imperialism, the grind towards progress via those liberal candidates who were viably moderate enough to get

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<sup>41</sup> Barber, 178.

<sup>42</sup> Mills, *Power Elite*, 275. Also see Miller, *Democracy*, 169.

elected would not suffice. The actual act of getting people to the polls and lobbying through coalition political wrangling was also a large turn off for the actionist Weathermen. It was becoming increasingly clear to the Weathermen that *they* were the only ones on the Left who were willing, really willing, to take the necessary steps and fight an armed revolutionary struggle for a socialist, anti-imperialist future. The Labor movement remained, by and large, a bulwark supporter of establishment liberalism, and often reacted violently to anti-establishment politics.<sup>43</sup> The Civil Rights movement had, in the eyes of the Weathermen, been swept up by the move towards Black Power and the black liberation movement, and the idea of Civil Rights movement-like change through the established political avenues was as antiquated as the PL's "all nationalism is reactionary" stance. Even the mainstream anti-war movement was viewed as the "wimpy liberal left," for not being willing to take up arms for the anti-imperialist cause.<sup>44</sup> The established liberal coalition members whom the *Port Huron* generation had faith in were opposed to the immediate revolutionary action, and convincing this coalition to the side of Weathers ideology and then winning in electoral politics through established avenues of protest/dissent was indeed a pipe dream.

Marxism and 1960's New Left thought on the political ideology were influential in the development of the Weathermen's politics, but their ideology featured notable and drastic distinctions from the classic Marxism that was at least partially on the radar of previous factions of SDS. First though, it is important to identify the Marxist strains of thought within Weather's ideology. The Weathermen, as originally envisioned, was a Marxist-Leninist organization, with the Weathermen themselves acting as the vanguard party and agency of

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<sup>43</sup> Wald, interview by author.

<sup>44</sup> Rudd, "Imperialism and its Discontents." The Weathermen disrupted National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (Mobe) events.

revolutionary change, mimicking many of the national liberation movements from which they drew inspiration. The Weathermen also envisioned a Communist world order as the end goal of their revolution, a position not well developed by the group, but in line with Marx's egalitarian and cooperative aims as well as Lenin's thought on imperialism.

Besides these points, the Weathermen deviated greatly from the Marxist program and revolutionary analysis for social change. As previously discussed, the Weathermen largely disregarded the industrial proletariat as the main driving force towards a socialist future, the flagship section of society which both the Old Left and the New had looked to as the crucial agents for radical change. To the Weathermen, every section of society that was not willing to take up armed struggle to overthrow U.S imperialism was not going to be agents of the revolution, and were therefore disregarded as revisionists. The revolution would not be brought by the masses of whites, and for that matter, whites and black working class cooperating together, but by the national liberation movements, of which Weather envisioned themselves as the "white fighting force." As Weathermen member Mark Rudd commented of the groups organizing thoughts: "only we Weathermen would be the good whites."<sup>45</sup>

Second, the Weathermen grounded their analysis in society in the language and rhetoric of defeating white supremacy and U.S imperialism, with noticeably trace amounts of explicit anti-capitalist rhetoric or a strong definition of the economic aspects of imperialism that is so crucial to a Marxist analysis. The Weathermen's serious lack of an economic analysis is highlighted when compared to earlier Marxist thought in SDS, and even by their last

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<sup>45</sup> Rudd, "Che and Me."

common ancestor RYM II, who's founding position paper was peppered with the Marxist economic foundation for their political ideology and program.<sup>46</sup>

Although supporting a socialist world order in a post revolutionary context as previously stated, the Weathermen's heretical view on revolutionary agency and its serious lack of an economic foundation which so characterizes Marxist groups go hand-in-hand. By taking away the mass working class industrial proletariat as the main agents of revolutionary Marxist change and relegating them to positions of secondary and tertiary importance, the Weathermen were placing the industrial proletariat in a subjacent role in the socio-economic life of the U.S as well. Marxist economics, so based in the role of the worker in the socio-economic sphere of a society relying to heavily on his class, was therefore off limits for the Weathermen in any kind of political analysis because they had relegated the worker in his importance.

Although liberalism and Marxism failed the Weathermen by definition, there are more intangible reasons for their turn towards such an exclusive and radical revolutionary ideology: no viable leadership, no dynamic precedent, and massive amounts of despair.

Many of the hopes that SDS had for liberalism, and furthermore, the promise of liberalism in the context of the American Century, were embodied in Kennedy and his politics. When SDS was under the workings of liberalism, there was some kind of guide, a larger than life figure, not in the sense of superhuman but as being able to wield tangible power, that was Kennedy. Kennedy vindicated a belief in liberalism, and much of SDS' early thought was based on the possibility of pushing progressive liberals such as Kennedy toward reform via the establishment. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, brought SDS' largest apprehensions of

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<sup>46</sup> Klonsky et al., *RYM II*.

liberalism to life. Richard Nixon would be no better, whom the Weathermen correctly analyzed as causing “accelerated repression domestically, and the heightening of the war through unleashing of strategic power against Hanoi,”<sup>47</sup> in the words of Carl Oglesby. Consequently, the betrayal of liberalism’s promise for social change via the establishment sent SDS out of the chartered comfort and pre-walked path of liberal reform.

Searching for an effective political ideology in a time of great demand for it, SDS began a journey into the treacherous territory of American Marxism. Meanwhile, the afflictions of war and injustice in society were galvanizing sectors of the U.S population towards the kind of mass movement SDS had sought to build. Apparent by the first march against the Vietnam War in Washington in 1965, there was a serious demand for some kind of massive mobilization. SDS was on the verge of fulfilling that role, but lacked guidance to draw upon. “It was...clearly evident from the turnout at that march, for example from the Women’s Strike for Peace, that there was an adult constituency,” stated Bob Ross, “What were we to do with that? How does a twenty-five year old lead a movement of forty-fifty year olds?”<sup>48</sup> The need for an SDS-like organization was clearly present, but there was no viable group from which SDS could draw upon as an example. Tom Hayden, stating of SDS’ organizational deficiencies in the wake of the exponential growth of the organization surrounding the anti-war movement and the “absence of a mature left:”

“...you never will figure out the answer by just looking at why students couldn’t form a permanent organization. You have to ask why were students at the absurd age of 18 to 22 thrown into the leadership of such *historic movements* in the first place. Why wasn’t there a left? Or why wasn’t there even an adult movement” [my italics added]?<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the political left outside of liberalism in the U.S that could show guidance to these radicals on their path towards revolutionary politics, was absent. “It’s got to be connected more to the absence of a serious political left in this country as a whole.”

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<sup>47</sup> Oglesby, *CHP*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ross, *CHP*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Hayden, *CHP*, 7.

Going on, Hayden would state on the reasons for the New Left's limitations:

“Even through the decade of the 60's, where millions of people were in motion, taking action, committing themselves, often committing their lives, many calling themselves revolutionaries, even after all of that, there still was, by the 70's, no powerful organization of the left.”<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, Bob Ross would coin this absence of an influential Left a “missing generation” who could not “apprentice” SDS in the ways of far left program and leadership.<sup>51</sup> It would be amiss to say there was *no* Left in the U.S, for there was present trade unionism, social democrats such as those in LID, as well as rivaling Communist factions. But the Left which they made up was not strong, not viable, and did not present to many in SDS a useful ideology and program for the leadership, decision-making role which they were thrust into.<sup>52</sup>

Even the Third World revolutionaries whom Weather looked to for inspiration remained largely distant romantic leaders. Although fighting for the same ends, the contexts of Third World national liberation struggles were vastly different from that of the Weathermen, as was evident by Weather's analysis of the “black colony.” The Weathermen juxtaposed themselves as contemporaries to these burgeoning national liberation movements, and though drawing on the rhetorical quality of their leadership, largely applied that rhetoric to their particular place within a revolutionary setting on their own.

As the 1960's progressed, injustice grew and the stakes for the ending of oppression drastically increased. SDS was still fending for their ideological selves amongst sharpening internal tensions, and there remained little to build upon. The revolutionary Left presented no

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<sup>50</sup> Hayden, *CHP*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ross, *CHP*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Essayist Peter Marin, commenting on this phenomenon in his essay “The Weathermen, Twenty Years on” would state that “the political left...had been dec9imated (sic) and divided by the Stalin Pact, the World War, factionalism, and old age.” Peter Marin, “The Weathermen, Twenty Years On,” *Harpers Magazine* (December 1987), <http://www.markrudd.com/?sds-and-weather/the-best-thing-ever-written-about-the-weathermen.html> (accessed January 20, 2011).

practical recourse, and liberalism, even if it had not scarred SDS from institutional change, had not successfully put forth a leader with all of Kennedy's appeal.<sup>53</sup> In the fall of 1969, as the inhumane bombing of Vietnam increased, radicals in SDS wondered how long their comrades in the National Liberation Front could hold out. For the charismatic members of the Weathermen, the question became "what could we do to stop the bombing?"<sup>54</sup> The Weathermen, in the context of this failure on the part of both liberalism and Marxism, turned to the only people they could trust in white America - the only radicals who were truly intent on defeating imperialism and white supremacy in solidarity with the Third World peoples: themselves.

The influence of Third World revolutionaries was part of what drove the Weathermen, as was their analysis of the U.S socio-economic political system as oppressor. Bravado was crucial as well, which solicits a discussion on the effect Left leadership could even have had on Weather by the time they transformed into an exclusive white fighting force. But there was another driving force, something less tangible, but directly related to the lack of an answer provided to these aforementioned ideologies provided: despair.

"there was this whole feeling of terrible frustration. The whole country was bombarded with the horrors of the war in Vietnam and all of us wanted to *do something*. You'd watch on TV and you'd see the child running down the street with the napalm stuck to her back and burning alive. You'd see it *every night*. Everybody wanted to do something *so bad*. They wanted to strike back *so bad*" [my italics added].<sup>55</sup>

How could you end this? Not within liberalism, and not Marxism in the context of the U.S., as had been shown.

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<sup>53</sup> While the horrors of the war and state repression had led indeed led to SDS radicals to abandon liberalism, liberal progressive figures such as Robert Kennedy and an increasingly critical Martin Luther King, Jr. presented a potential latent opening in the system. Before their potential could fully develop and manifest, they were both assassinated in 1968.

<sup>54</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Mellen, *CHP*, 34.



The charismatic Weathermen developed a program and platform that they thought could address these dire circumstances. With their charisma and determination, they saw their chosen ideological program through. Mark Rudd, after seeing Weathermen footage for the first time in years, rationalized this combination of fury at the geo-political situation, the inexperience of youth, and the natural response to both unchecked by some kind of guidance: “...it was only after seeing myself on the screen as a 22 year-old, that I understood the source of my violence: grief...you can see the grief all over my face. And the natural response to grief is rage and violence. Bring the war home!”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Rudd, “Thinking about the Weather Underground Documentary,” <http://www.markrudd.com/?sds-and-weather/thinking-about-the-weather-underground-documentary.html> (accessed January 20, 2011).

## Conclusion

*“But the young in the Sixties looked at power, evil and greed and had nothing around them—no tradition, no community—to guide them; they created their response out of thin air and nerve, out of sympathy and the anger of betrayed children. They tried, as best they could, through violence, to topple or simply nudge the weight, the rock, of what it was they had discovered, and the fact that it moved not an inch is not necessarily what proves their tactics false. It may, indeed, be precisely what proves them necessary.”<sup>1</sup>*

-Peter Marin, Harpers Magazine

Before the year of 1969 was over, the Weathermen would hold their “War Council” in Flint, Michigan, where it became apparent that the group would go underground, transforming them from the Weathermen to the Weather Underground Organization.<sup>2</sup> Having closed the SDS office in Chicago, the WUO was now an autonomous organization of white revolutionary youth separated from the mainstream New Left which had spawned it.

The Weathermen have been chastised not only for their use of violence, but for closing the doors on Students for a Democratic Society and ending the great experiment of participatory democracy. This thesis has argued that the rise of the Weathermen within SDS does not reflect an opportunistic group of charismatic and egotistical radicals seizing power, although those elements were indeed present in the characteristics of the group. Rather, the rise of the Weathermen was a reflection of the despair of a generation, and the failure of dominant political ideologies to present real and viable solutions to issues of war and injustice. SDS was betrayed by liberalism and the establishment which it had looked to as a source of progressive reform. In its early period, the monumental power of the government seemed amenable to the ideals of SDS and duty bound to justice and equality. In the early years of the 1960’s, Kennedy’s increasing receptiveness to progressive reforms seemed to

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<sup>1</sup> Marin, “The Weathermen.”

<sup>2</sup> Berger, *Outlaws*, 326

signal that that belief was soon to become a reality. After his death, that promise of Kennedy's liberalism transformed into the role of liberalism as oppressor itself.

Johnson's elevation of Cold War militarism over the principles of social justice and domestic reform confirmed SDS' worst fears. The establishment had become the oppressor. SDS looked to the other historic political ideology of the time: Marxism. Marxism and its program of upending the revolutionary change sat well with SDS radicals, but it was not dynamic enough to relate to the realities of race, youth, and labor agency in the U.S. Indeed, it was not nearly bold enough for the task at hand.

And the task at hand was great. Oppression was increasing in the Third World at the hands of U.S militarism, weak social programs did little to address the root issues racial and class in equality, and activism was being repressed by a state apparatus set on quelling domestic unrest. For many radicals, including those who became the Weathermen and their supporters, the time to act to end the oppression was now. The Weathermen radicals looked at their world, the oppression, the inability of liberalism and Marxism to amend that oppression, and in the context of rage and despair, formulated an ideology, analysis, and program which they perceived could accomplish what both liberalism and Marxism had failed to do.

In his 1960 "Letter to the New Left," C. Wright Mills astutely identified the "collapse of...historic agencies"<sup>3</sup> as a central issue which the New Left would have to address in the coming years. As Mills argued, and SDS vindicated, students could provide that new agency of change. Stranded by the two dominant political ideologies of the era, it was not foreseen

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<sup>3</sup>Mills, "Letter to the New Left," 7

that student youth would stand alone as viable and committed agents of change in white America.

Liberalism, however, would have a resurgence. Five years after the Weathermen went underground, Nixon resigned because of the Watergate scandal, the War in Vietnam ended, and in the words of Tom Hayden, “the people who tried to put us in prison went to prison themselves.” The Weathermen were expecting “the worse to only get worse,” but things got better.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Weather Underground was effectively disbanded by 1980, and Hayden hypothesized that all the former Weathermen who were eligible to vote<sup>5</sup> did so for Barack Obama in 2008.

What does this say about the power of the democratic capitalist system? When it is harnessed for good and lives up to its ideals, it is appealing. The Marxist and Third Worldist ideologies which the Weathermen looked to brought much despair to the areas of the world where they succeeded. Advocates of Marxism are still searching to present a viable alternative to an establishment that is so appealing when it lives up to its “promise.”

Liberalism, Marxism, and the rise of the Weathermen in SDS presents a history of despair, but with a new promise. Their activism challenged liberalism, and in no small part amended those ills of the Vietnam War and forms of government oppression. While SDS may have had no strong left to guide them, SDS and the New Left now presented a foundation upon which a Left in the U.S can, and has, grown. Out of the New Left ideology of non-proletariat agency has evolved a wide range of activist movements, such as women’s liberation, gay liberation, and environmentalism. The student activism of SDS’ hayday

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden, “Community Organizing,” 10/14

<sup>5</sup> Former Weatherman/WUO member David Gilbert remains in prison. For more information on his status and continuing activism, See Dan Berger’s *Outlaws of America*.

remains an inspiration to the socially conscious student populations across the country. And while the program of the Weathermen proved for all intensive purposes to be a gross miscalculation, former members are still committed to discovering the correct path to ending oppression. Mark Rudd for instance, is still a committed anti-imperialist but has dedicated a significant portion of his time to educating future generations of activists on the merits on non-violent recourse.<sup>6</sup> While contradictions in the liberal establishment remain and Marxism still frustrates, for a new generation looking to confront oppression in the world, former activists like Mark are now a resource. For to learn the lessons of those who have gone before is invaluable knowledge, and one needn't have walked the correct path to illuminate a better one.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, see Mark's website. [www.markrudd.com](http://www.markrudd.com)

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